

**FROM LIKES TO PURCHASES: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCERS IN
CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING**

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INTRODUCTION

With the accelerated growth of the internet, individuals are more present on social media, sharing and building relationships. This constant sharing can be seen as an electronic word of mouth (eWOM), a phenomenon adapted from the traditional word of mouth. Highly credible eWOM translates into influencer marketing as influencers naturally do it in their daily lives in the digital environment (Santiago & Castelo, 2020). Through electronic word of mouth, people started to strongly influence others. Thus, digital influencers emerged by sharing knowledge and connecting with people interested through their content, and they wielded various forms of social power, such as expert power, informational power, referential power, and legitimate reciprocity (Wang & Huang, 2023). Due to this connection between the audience and the influencer, people interact and engage with the content, significantly influencing consumer engagement behaviors and affect the likelihood of purchase (Gammarano et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2022; Souto et al., 2021; Wang & Huang, 2023).

Today, there are countless digital influencers on social media, varying in size in terms of followers and influence. This new category increasingly focuses on creating influential content for followers, divided into different niches (beauty, lifestyle, fashion, self-care, sports, games, etc.). Consequently, digital influencers are recognized as professionals, making content creation a monetized job through brand advertising. Trust, information quality, and entertainment value have significant direct effects on the credibility of influencers and significant indirect effects on consumers' purchase intentions (Saima & Khan, 2020). The freedom of co-creation between influencers and brands is very important for advertisements to be credible and efficient (Santiago & Castelo, 2020; Pereira et al., 2023).

Therefore, influencer marketing is growing and offering new opportunities for companies to explore, bringing new communication strategies for brands. Hence, it is essential for brands to be present in digital spaces to understand how this new environment works and the behavior of these consumers. This type of marketing is interesting for brands because digital influencers play the role of connecting and allowing them to communicate effectively with consumers. Through this communication, companies can increase recognition, improve their market positioning, and consequently boost sales. Hence, brands invest in digital influencers to enhance their communication skills and social media presence and reach the appropriate target consumers (Jayanto et al., 2022).

As influencer marketing is still a relatively new field, some important unknown gaps exist. The literature highlights essential characteristics of influencers such as credibility, attractiveness, and parasocial relationships with followers (Pereira et al., 2023); the influencers' social power on consumer engagement and purchase behavior (Wang & Huang, 2023), with trust and credibility being critical mediators (Saima & Khan, 2020; Mabkhot et al., 2022). Thus, this study aims to understand how this marketing works effectively, specifically its impacts on people's consumption behavior and purchase intentions, and the roles played by factors such as attractiveness, congruence between influencer and brand, engagement, credibility, and trust in influencing consumers' purchase intentions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The relationship between digital influencers and brands significantly impacts purchase intention. Influencer marketing affects consumer attitudes toward the brand, admiration for the

brand, and ultimately, purchase intentions, making purchase intention a critical construct for the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Trivedi & Sama, 2020).

Digital influencers can significantly influence followers' consumption behavior, affecting their perceptions and purchase intentions toward brands (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Through their content, engagement with digital influencers impacts every stage of the purchase process, from awareness to purchase (Delbaere, Michael, & Phillips, 2020).

Trust significantly impacts purchase intention by influencing brand image, trust, and satisfaction (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Credibility influences purchase intention, positively affecting followers' attitudes and consumption behavior (Belanche et al., 2021).

This study's theoretical background explores the key factors that influence the effectiveness of digital influencer marketing. It examines how the influencer's attractiveness, the congruence between the influencer and the brand, the level of engagement with the influencer, the trust consumers place in the influencer, and the influencer's overall credibility impact consumer behavior and purchase intentions. By understanding these relationships, the study provides a comprehensive framework that highlights the critical elements driving successful influencer marketing campaigns.

Attractiveness

Analyzing beyond traditional metrics to understand the effectiveness of digital influencer marketing requires moving past merely numerical factors like the number of followers. Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) argue that traditional metrics are insufficient to measure influencers' performance and complicate decision-making for brand managers. Consequently, they based their analysis on the Source Credibility Model, originally created by Hovland et al. (1982) and later expanded by Ohanian (1990). This model suggests that for a source to be deemed credible, it must meet three criteria: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Applied to digital influencer marketing, the model implies that influencers should be attractive, have experience with the product or service, and appear reliable to their followers (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

In the digital context, trust and attractiveness are the two most significant factors for digital influencers. These factors positively impact satisfaction, brand image, and trust among both brands and consumers, ultimately influencing purchase intentions (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Therefore, these factors should be considered alongside traditional metrics when assessing the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

Torres et al. (2019) also highlighted the impacts of attractiveness on the effectiveness of digital influencer marketing. Using the Source Attractiveness Model by McGuire (1985) as a basis, they understood that attractiveness encompasses familiarity and affection from followers towards the influencer. Their analysis showed that an influencer's attractiveness directly influences consumer attitudes towards the brand and the influencer, thereby affecting purchase intention. This effect is due to the familiarity and affection followers feel towards the influencer, prompting them to engage more positively with advertisements involving the influencer. Thus, Torres et al. (2019) concluded that, along with the congruence between the influencer and the brand, attractiveness is essential for effective digital influencer marketing, producing positive and direct effects on consumer behavior.

Based on these insights, the following hypotheses regarding attractiveness were developed:

H1: The more (less) attractive the digital influencer is to the consumer, the greater (lower) the impact on engagement.

H2: The more (less) attractive the digital influencer is to the consumer, the greater (lower) the impact on trust.

H3: The more (less) attractive the digital influencer is to the consumer, the greater (lower) the impact on credibility.

Congruence between Influencer and Brand

Analyzing the effects of an influencer's attractiveness and the congruence between the influencer and the brand on consumer behavior and purchase intention, two constructs— attractiveness and congruence—strongly impact consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Torres et al., 2019). The congruence between the influencer and the brand transfers meaning to the consumer; when high congruence is perceived, the meanings conveyed by the brand are transferred to the influencer, making the influencer represent the brand (Torres et al., 2019).

The congruence between the digital influencer and the brand positively affects followers' consumption attitudes and enhances the perception of the influencer's credibility, which indirectly affects purchase intention. Hence, the congruence between the influencer and the brand is fundamental for evaluating the efficiency of influencer marketing, as followers perceive influencers with high congruence as more credible sources (Belanche et al., 2021).

The positive impact of congruence on the influencer's image and the effectiveness of advertising affects consumers' perceptions of the influencer's experience and trustworthiness. Advertisements with high congruence between the influencer and the brand led to improved consumer attitudes and increased purchase intentions. It is beneficial for digital influencers to advertise brands that align with their level of experience and interests, and for brands to choose influencers whose values and ideas match theirs (Breves et al., 2019).

From these studies, the following hypotheses regarding congruence were developed:

H4: The greater (lower) the congruence between the influencer and the brand, the greater (lower) the impact on consumer trust.

H5: The greater (lower) the congruence between the influencer and the brand, the greater (lower) the impact on credibility.

Engagement

Engagement is a significant measure of the effectiveness of digital influencer marketing. While the number of followers is commonly used to assess effectiveness, engagement provides a complementary criterion to understand the authenticity of the influencer's follower base and the interaction and involvement of these followers with the content (Santiago & Castelo, 2020).

Follower interactions are important for engagement. Interactions such as likes, comments, and shares translate into engagement. Brands should consider consumer engagement, not just the number of followers an influencer has when evaluating the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Engagement significantly influences followers' consumption and purchase intentions (Gammarano et al., 2020). Influencers' content affects each stage of brand engagement, from awareness to purchase (Delbaere et al., 2020). The impact of engagement on purchase intention can be analyzed through Hollebeek et al.'s (2014) model, which includes cognitive processing, affection, and activation.

The cognitive process involves consumers' thoughts about the brand, driven by influencer content, which spreads brand awareness. Affection is shown by positive follower reactions, while activation involves follower interaction with content, demonstrating the influence of influencer recommendations on purchase intentions (Delbaere et al., 2020). So, digital influencers play a crucial role in brand engagement and, consequently, purchase

intention. The type of content and the influencer's personality strengthen relationships with followers, enhancing brand engagement (Gammarano et al., 2020).

Based on this information, the following hypothesis regarding engagement was developed:

H6: The greater (lower) the consumer's engagement with the digital influencer, the greater (lower) the impact on purchase intention.

Trust

Trust is a critical factor influencing followers' decision-making related to digital influencers on social media. Trust in the influencer significantly impacts followers' consumption behavior. The content's authenticity and the influencer's perceived experience and knowledge about the product increase consumer trust, thereby affecting purchase decisions (Gammarano et al., 2020).

Trust and attractiveness are the most important factors for digital influencer marketing, positively impacting brand satisfaction, image, and consumer trust and affecting purchase intentions. Trust is the construct with the strongest effect on brand image, trust, and satisfaction, having the greatest indirect impact on purchase intention (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

In order to analyze trust, the following hypothesis was developed:

H7: The greater (lower) the consumer's trust in the digital influencer, the greater (lower) the impact on purchase intention.

Credibility

Credibility contributes to the success of digital influencer marketing. It significantly affects followers' attitudes and consumer behavior toward the influencer and the endorsed brand. Influencers must maintain credibility to foster positive consumer behavior and effective advertising (Belanche et al., 2021).

Content credibility attracts follower interest, positively impacting attitudes towards the content and increasing the willingness to seek more information about it. High perceived credibility leads to positive consumer attitudes towards the brand and behavioral intentions (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Breves et al., 2019).

Based on these findings, the following hypothesis regarding credibility was developed:

H8: The greater (lower) the credibility of the digital influencer, the greater (lower) the impact on purchase intention.

Theoretical Framework

Considering the information collected in the theoretical background and analyzing the constructs and hypotheses, the following Theoretical Framework was proposed for this study:

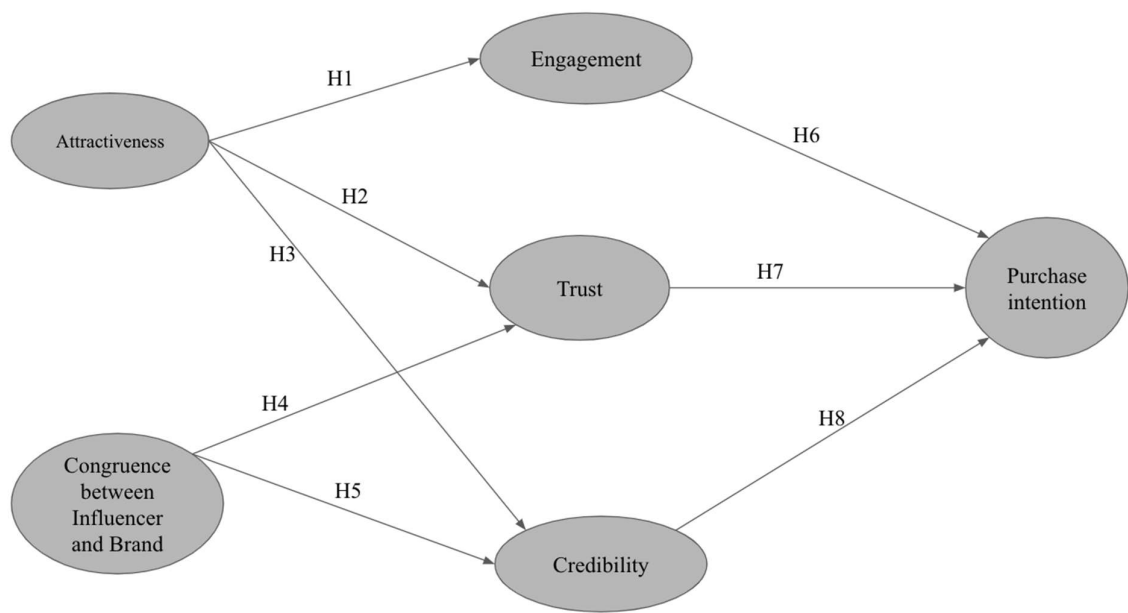


Figure 1 - Proposed theoretical framework

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research methodology was chosen to address the research questions. This methodology allows for the precise identification and understanding of the impacts and effectiveness of digital influencer marketing on consumer behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). This approach also helps determine the roles of attractiveness, congruence between influencer and brand, engagement, credibility, and trust in influencing consumers' purchase intentions.

Data was collected through an online survey to gather information from individuals who regularly use social media and follow digital influencers. There were no restrictions on age, gender, region, or other demographic factors as long as the respondents had some familiarity with digital influencers and influencer marketing. The survey included a questionnaire to measure the theoretical framework's constructs accurately. The scales used in the questionnaire were adapted from previous validated studies and translated into Portuguese for this research. The scales and their sources are detailed in Table 1, including constructs such as attractiveness, congruence between influencer and brand, engagement, trust, credibility, and purchase intention, with each item measured using a 7-point Likert scale to allow respondents to express their degree of agreement or disagreement. Additionally, the questionnaire included a demographic question to identify the age of the respondents. The survey was administered online using Google Forms.

Construct	Scale
Attractiveness	Adapted from Weismueller et al. (2020) and Reinikainen et al. (2020)
Congruence between Influencer and Brand	Adapted from Xu and Pratt (2018)

Engagement	Adapted from Lourenço et al. (2022)
Trust	Adapted from Reinikainen et al. (2020)
Credibility	Adapted from Moulard et al. (2015) and Reinikainen et al. (2020)
Purchase intention	Adapted from Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019)

Table 1 - Scales used in the research

The data analysis used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This comprehensive statistical approach combines factor analysis and regression, allowing for the simultaneous analysis of relationships between measured variables and latent constructs and relationships among latent constructs. PLS-SEM was chosen for its suitability for exploratory research, focusing on theory development and explaining the variance of the constructs. This method is ideal for complex models and smaller sample sizes (Hair et al., 2017). The PLS-SEM analysis included the evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model. The reliability and validity of the constructs and scales were verified to assess the measurement model. Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability values were used to evaluate the reliability of the constructs, with all constructs achieving satisfactory values above the recommended minimum of 0.70, indicating reliable scales. Convergent validity was assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE) indicator, with most constructs showing values above the recommended 0.50, confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, ensuring that the square root of the AVE of each construct was higher than its correlation with other constructs, thereby confirming the discriminant validity of all variables.

The structural model evaluation included examining collinearity issues, the significance of relationships, and the model's explanatory power. Variance inflation factor (VIF) indicators were checked to ensure no multicollinearity, with all VIF values below the maximum recommended value of 5. The model's explanatory power was evaluated using adjusted R² values, indicating small, medium, and large effects on engagement, trust, and credibility. The model's overall fit was confirmed with an RMSR value of 0.153.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey collected responses from 207 participants, and all the responses from the sample were considered valid. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 60 and had a mean age of 29.7. Of the respondents, 58% were female, 40% were male, and 2% identified as non-binary or preferred not to say. The respondents reported daily social media use, with Instagram being the most frequently used platform, followed by Facebook and YouTube.

The measurement model was evaluated for reliability and validity. In order to characterize the dispersion of responses, each variable's mean and standard deviation were analyzed, and all showed adequate dispersion. The results for each variable are shown in the Appendix. All constructs had Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability values above 0.70, indicating high reliability. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was above 0.50, confirming convergent validity. However, the attractiveness and engagement revealed values slightly below 0.50, thus showing a convergent validity of the scales slightly lower than expected. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity, and all constructs met the required conditions, confirming that each construct was distinct from the others (Hair et al., 2017). The results are presented in Table 2.

	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6
1-Attractiveness	0.801	0.838	0.468	0.684					
2-Trust	0.896	0.936	0.831	0.501	0.911				
3-Congruence	0.950	0.964	0.870	0.317	0.583	0.933			
4-Credibility	0.893	0.919	0.653	0.418	0.824	0.632	0.808		
5-Engagement	0.820	0.860	0.412	0.254	0.281	0.381	0.300	0.642	
6-Purchase intention	0.876	0.921	0.797	0.361	0.411	0.426	0.486	0.361	0.893

Table 2 - Measurement model

The structural model was evaluated by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) indicators, path coefficients, and p-values to ensure no multicollinearity issues and assess the significance of the hypothesized relationships. The adjusted R² values indicated that the model explained a substantial portion of the variance in the dependent variables.

Hypothesis	VIF	f^2
H ₁ : Attractiveness → Engagement	1.000	0.069
H ₂ : Attractiveness → Trust	1.112	0.202
H ₃ : Attractiveness → Credibility	1.112	0.096
H ₄ : Congruence → Trust	1.112	0.364
H ₅ : Congruence → Credibility	1.112	0.507
H ₆ : Engagement → Purchase intention	1.103	0.071
H ₇ : Trust → Purchase intention	3.124	0.000
H ₈ : Credibility → Purchase intention	3.163	0.074

Table 3 - Result of the structural model

The path coefficient index was applied to analyze the relationships' significance, as observed in Figure 2 (β in the arrows and the significance index (p-value) in the arrows between parentheses).

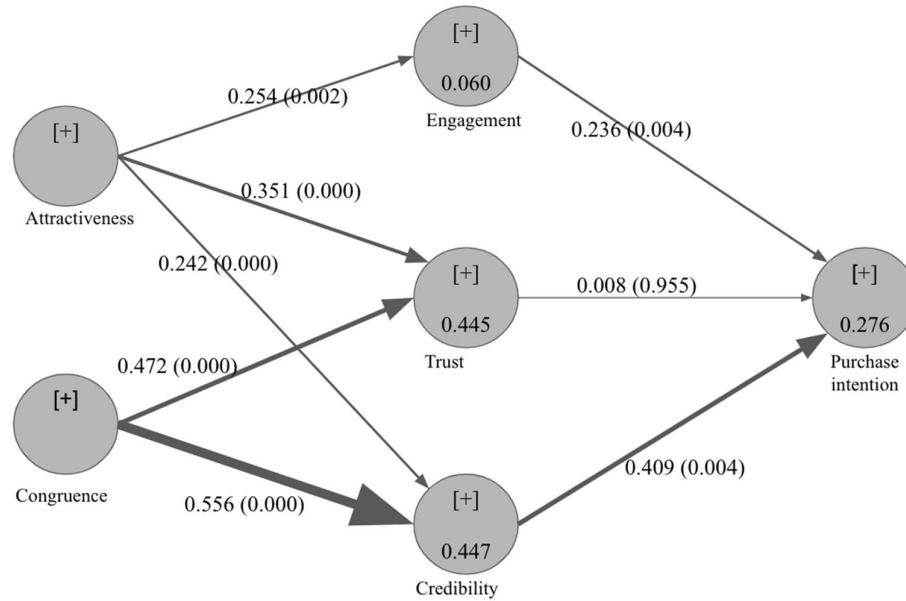


Figure 2 - Structural model

Analyzing the relationship between attractiveness and engagement revealed satisfactory rates ($\beta = 0.254$; $p = 0.002$) and supported H1. As well as H2, which showed a statistically significant relationship ($\beta = 0.351$; $p = 0.000$) between attractiveness and trust. Hypothesis H3 obtained statistical support, which presents a connection between attractiveness and credibility ($\beta = 0.242$; $p = 0.000$). The proposed relationship between congruence and trust, portrayed in H4, showed positive significance ($\beta = 0.472$; $p = 0.000$) and supported the hypothesis. Then, the impact of congruence on credibility was the most significant relationship ($\beta = 0.556$; $p = 0.000$) and showed statistical support for H5. In H6, which represents the effect of engagement on purchase intention, a satisfactory result ($\beta = 0.236$; $p = 0.004$) was demonstrated to support the relationship. The relationship between trust and purchase intention did not obtain statistical significance ($\beta = 0.008$; $p = 0.955$) and therefore did not support H7. Finally, H8, the relationship between credibility and purchase intention, was significant ($\beta = 0.409$; $p = 0.004$) and was supported.

Furthermore, analyzing the evaluation of the structural model as a whole, it can be said that the developed model has 6% explanatory power (adjusted R²) for engagement, and in relation to the path coefficients, attractiveness showed a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.254$). The trust had an adjusted R² of 44.5%, and its most significant relationship, explained by attractiveness and congruence, was with congruence ($\beta = 0.472$). The explained variance (adjusted R²) of credibility was 44.7%, and between attractiveness and congruence, its most significant relationship was also with congruence ($\beta = 0.556$). Lastly, the explanatory power of the purchase intention construct was 27.6%, so, considering engagement, trust, and credibility, its most significant connection was with credibility ($\beta = 0.409$). These results are shown in Figure 2, with the adjusted R² being the value positioned inside the circles.

To sum up, the adjusted R² values indicate that engagement had a small explanatory effect, trust and credibility had large effects, and purchase intention had a medium explanatory effect.

To finalize the analysis of results, the RMSR of the estimated model, an indicator of the study's error measure, was verified. This model obtained an RMSR of 0.153, which was verified as an adequate value.

Thus, considering the relationships developed through the eight hypotheses, seven hypotheses were statistically significant, and one (H7) did not show statistical support. Table 4 summarizes the supported and unsupported hypotheses.

Hypotheses	Decision
H ₁ : Attractiveness → Engagement	Supported
H ₂ : Attractiveness → Trust	Supported
H ₃ : Attractiveness → Credibility	Supported
H ₄ : Congruence → Trust	Supported
H ₅ : Congruence → Credibility	Supported
H ₆ : Engagement → Purchase intention	Supported
H ₇ : Trust → Purchase intention	Not supported
H ₈ : Credibility → Purchase intention	Supported

Table 4 - Supported and unsupported hypotheses

The results of this study confirm the significant role of digital influencer attractiveness and congruence with the brand in influencing consumer behavior. The attractiveness of the influencer positively impacts engagement, trust, and credibility, which in turn enhances the consumer's purchase intention. This finding aligns with previous research by Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) and Torres et al. (2019), who emphasized the importance of attractiveness in influencer marketing.

Congruence between the influencer and the brand was a critical factor, significantly affecting consumer trust and credibility. This supports the findings of Belanche et al. (2021) and Breves et al. (2019), who highlighted that congruence leads to better consumer attitudes and higher purchase intentions. Engagement with the influencer was shown to have the strongest impact on purchase intention, indicating that active interaction with influencer content is crucial for converting followers into buyers. This result is consistent with the studies by Martínez-López et al. (2020) and Delbaere et al. (2020), who found that engagement plays a pivotal role in consumer decision-making.

Interestingly, trust in the influencer did not significantly impact purchase intention. This finding suggests that while trust is important, other factors such as attractiveness, congruence, and credibility may play more dominant roles in influencing purchasing decisions. This partially contrasts with Wiedmann and von Mettenheim's (2020) findings, suggesting that further research is needed to explore the complex dynamics of trust in influencer marketing.

The influencer's credibility was also a significant predictor of purchase intention. This underscores the importance of influencers maintaining a credible image to effectively persuade their audience, as highlighted by Belanche et al. (2021) and Breves et al. (2019).

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the impact of digital influencer marketing on consumers' purchase intentions, focusing on the roles of attractiveness, congruence between influencer and brand, engagement, credibility, and trust. The results demonstrate that digital influencer marketing significantly influences consumer behavior through these factors.

The attractiveness of the digital influencer was found to be a critical determinant of engagement, trust, and credibility. This aligns with previous research, emphasizing that attractive influencers are more effective in engaging their audience and building trust. Similarly, the congruence between the influencer and the brand was shown to be essential for enhancing consumer trust and credibility. This indicates that when there is a strong alignment between the influencer's values and the brand's image, consumers are more likely to perceive the influencer as trustworthy and credible, positively affecting their purchase intentions.

Engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase intention, highlighting the importance of interactive and engaging content in influencer marketing. Influencers who can actively involve their followers in their content can significantly drive consumer purchase behavior. This finding underscores the necessity for brands to collaborate with influencers who can generate high levels of engagement.

Interestingly, trust in the influencer did not significantly impact purchase intention. This suggests that while trust is an important factor, its effect may be mediated by other variables, such as credibility and engagement. This finding indicates that consumers may rely more on the perceived expertise and the interactive nature of the influencer's content rather than trust alone when making purchase decisions.

The credibility of the influencer was a significant factor influencing purchase intention. Influencers perceived as credible can effectively persuade their audience and influence their purchase decisions. This underscores the importance of maintaining authenticity and reliability in influencer marketing strategies. Engaging influencers who can foster active interaction with their followers can significantly enhance marketing effectiveness and drive purchase intentions. Brands should focus on building authentic relationships with influencers to leverage their credibility and maximize the impact on consumer behavior.

Overall, this study contributes to understanding how digital influencer marketing affects consumer behavior. For the theory, this study expands the knowledge about the impact of digital influencer attributes—such as attractiveness, congruence with the brand, engagement, credibility, and trust—on consumer purchase intentions. The findings provide insights for marketers and brands on the key factors to consider when selecting and working with digital influencers. Brands should prioritize attractive influencers who are congruent with their values and capable of engaging their audience to maximize the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns.

Future research could explore the complex dynamics of trust in influencer marketing and investigate other potential mediating variables that influence consumer purchase intentions. Additionally, examining the impact of different types of content and various social media platforms on consumer behavior would further enrich the understanding of digital influencer marketing.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire and Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Attractiveness		
I consider the influencer attractive, in terms of content	0.736	0.054
I consider the influencer interesting	0.831	0.036
I consider the influencer pleasant	0.685	0.065
I feel that the influencer and I have a lot in common	0.558	0.123
I feel that the influencer and I are very similar	0.584	0.118
I identify a lot with the influencer	0.622	0.114
Trust		
I feel that the influencer is sincere	0.963	0.006

I feel that the influencer is honest	0.933	0.017
I consider the influencer serious	0.827	0.038
Congruence between influencer and brand		
The influencer has a good match with the products/brands	0.935	0.014
The compatibility between the influencer and the products/brands is high	0.944	0.013
The alignment between the influencer and the products/brands is high	0.930	0.015
The congruence between the influencer and the products/brands is high	0.917	0.024
Credibility		
I feel that the influencer is genuine	0.830	0.037
The influencer seems real to me	0.819	0.038
I feel that the influencer is authentic	0.815	0.040
I feel that the influencer knows a lot about the product	0.825	0.028
I consider the influencer to be an expert on the product	0.737	0.037
I consider the influencer sufficiently experienced to make claims about the product	0.798	0.033
Engagement		
I like to know facts about the product/brand	0.713	0.082
I often search for more information on the product/brand	0.676	0.093
I actively look for more information related to the product/brand	0.721	0.086
I try to look for new products with other brand customers	0.491	0.142
I seek to interact with other brand customers	0.547	0.116
Looking for new products information with other customers makes me better understand the brand	0.444	0.145
I like what the brand represents	0.593	0.131
I have good feelings when I look for new brand products	0.691	0.111
I have good feelings when I buy a product from the brand	0.664	0.127
Purchase intention		
I would buy a product from a certain brand based on advice given by the influencer	0.951	0.009
I would follow brands recommended by the influencer	0.777	0.044
In the future, I will buy products from influencer-recommended brands	0.935	0.013