THE EFFECT OF INFLUENCER CHARACTERISTICS ON PURCHASE BEHAVIOR: A PLS-SEM ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rapid spread of social media on a global scale has significantly changed the dynamics of digital marketing, and in particular the critical role of influencers in product and service promotion. This study aims to examine the influence of variables such as attitudes towards influencers, influencers' physical and social attractiveness, their expertise, credibility, and the brand image of the products they promote on influencers' intentions to purchase products or services. The research envisages analyzing these relationships through a structural model. In the model, attitude towards influencers, physical and social attractiveness are defined as exogenous latent variables, while trust in influencers, their expertise and the brand image of the promoted brand are identified as mediating endogenous latent variables. The sample of the study consists of 306 users who follow at least one influencer on social media. Data were collected through online surveys. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the hypotheses and evaluate the fit of the model. The findings show that the fit of the proposed model is within acceptable limits and only two hypotheses are not supported. The strongest relationships are between attitude towards influencers and influencers' expertise, between the attractiveness of influencers and the image of the promoted brand, and between brand image and purchase intention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, most social interactions take place in online environments where influence processes occur continuously (Balaban et al., 2022). Influencers play a central role in these interactions as individuals followed by large groups of social media users. Social media (SM) users interact with influencer-generated content, participate in discussions, and join the virtual communities created by influencers. The main goal of influencers is to attract, retain, and engage followers, thereby increasing both their visibility and commercial potential (Farivar et al., 2022). As social media platforms have become integrated into daily life, influencers have gained significant importance in shaping consumer perceptions, preferences, and ultimately their purchase decisions.

With the widespread adoption of the Internet, traditional marketing tools such as television, magazines, and radio have gradually lost effectiveness. Influencer recommendations, however, are often perceived as more authentic, relatable, and trustworthy compared to messages delivered through conventional marketing channels. Studies show that consumers place greater trust in influencers than in family or friends, and approximately 40% of consumers purchase products used or recommended by social media influencers (Sekhon et al., 2016). Therefore, many brands use influencer collaborations to strengthen visibility and brand awareness.

As user-generated content increases, influencers have also begun to function as creators of social relationships and virtual communities. By sharing personal stories, lifestyle content, and product evaluations, influencers guide consumer perceptions and serve as modern opinion leaders (Masuda et al., 2022). Research indicates that consumers encounter more product messages from influencers than from brands themselves (De Veirman et al., 2017). Influencer visibility has also been associated with stronger brand image formation (Ateke, 2013). In this context, the effectiveness of influencer marketing has become a key topic in understanding consumer behavior, particularly as advertisements on social media continue to grow and brands increasingly collaborate with influencers to reach wider audiences (Ye et al., 2021).

Although the role of influencers in shaping purchase intentions has been widely acknowledged, previous studies generally examine expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as separate constructs. This fragmented approach provides only a partial understanding of how influencers shape consumer attitudes and behaviors. In particular, the combined influence of personal characteristics (such as physical and social attractiveness) and perceived qualities (including expertise, trustworthiness, and brand image) has received limited empirical attention. Existing research offers valuable insights but often focuses on isolated variables or bilateral relationships, overlooking how these factors jointly affect consumer decision-making within a structured model. This highlights the need for an integrated analytical framework that can evaluate these interrelated components together.

The present study aims to address this gap by examining physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and brand image simultaneously within a Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach. By integrating both personal and perceived influencer attributes, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how influencers shape consumer purchase intentions. The findings are expected to guide brands in selecting appropriate influencers and designing more effective marketing strategies, while also

contributing to academic discussions on influencer effectiveness and consumer behavior in digital environments.

To achieve these objectives, data were collected from 306 social media users who follow at least one influencer. The proposed relationships were analyzed using PLS-SEM, which offers methodological robustness in testing complex, multi-dimensional influencer–consumer dynamics. Through this approach, the study provides an empirically grounded framework that enhances the understanding of influencer-based marketing in contemporary digital settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Media

There is no official or universally accepted definition of social media (SM) (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). One of the earliest definitions by Blackshaw (2004) describes SM as "online information created, distributed, and used by consumers about products, brands, personalities, and various issues." According to Safko and Brake (2009), the term "social media" encompasses all interactions among online individuals who use web-based applications to communicate and share knowledge, experience, and ideas.

Social media consists of diverse platforms enabling users to create, share, and interact with online content. These platforms have rapidly evolved, transforming communication, information acquisition, and social participation (Duong, 2020). Research highlights the extensive societal effects of SM, including its influence on consumer behavior, political discourse, cultural norms, and learning environments (Tanwar et al., 2023; Omar & Ondimu, 2024; Van et al., 2019). Professional social media platforms (PSMPs) such as LinkedIn facilitate networking and career development, as summarized by recent systematic reviews (Ruparel et al., 2023). In academic contexts, SM supports the dissemination of research and interaction with broader audiences, with altmetrics emerging as new indicators of academic impact (Sugimoto et al., 2016).

SM also enables users, communities, and organizations to modify, share, and respond to content, while offering companies opportunities to communicate directly with consumers and co-create value (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Stokes, 2013). The Uses and Gratifications framework suggests that individuals rely on SM to satisfy cognitive, social, and hedonic needs, which contributes to highly interactive consumer–brand dynamics. Since these platforms facilitate

visibility, parasocial interaction, and user engagement, they form an essential psychological and technological environment in which influencer persuasion processes occur.

Therefore, understanding the role of SM provides the foundational context for examining the influencer-related variables included in this study's model.

2.1.1. Social Media Marketing

Vaynerchuk (2013) categorizes modern marketing activities into digital, traditional, and social forms. As traditional media has declined, social media platforms have become essential tools for reaching audiences. According to Safko and Brake (2009), interacting with online users represents not only a new toolset but also a new technology for building relationships. Social media marketing (SMM) involves activities such as content creation, community engagement, paid advertising, and influencer collaborations, with the primary aim of increasing brand visibility and influencing purchase decisions.

A comprehensive 20-year review demonstrates that SM has evolved into a powerful marketing channel shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors (Bartoloni & Ancillai, 2024). SMM activities positively affect consumer intentions, sustained platform usage, engagement, and purchasing tendencies (Jamil et al., 2022). These effects are often reinforced through psychological mechanisms such as social identification, perceived usefulness, and satisfaction. Research further suggests that SMM enhances brand–consumer interactions by enabling real-time communication, co-creation, and relational bonding.

Given that influencer marketing functions as a specialized form of SMM that leverages individuals with strong online presence and trustworthiness, it plays a key role in transmitting persuasive cues that influence consumer attitudes. Thus, SMM serves as an important conceptual foundation for understanding how influencer-related variables may contribute to consumers' behavioral responses.

Accordingly, insights from the SMM literature support the expectation that influencer-linked attributes will shape consumer engagement and ultimately influence purchase intention in this study.

2.1.2. Social Media Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing refers to the strategic use of key individuals or opinion leaders to influence social media users' brand awareness and purchasing decisions. The natural characteristics of influencers play a central role in persuading brands and marketers to collaborate with them. Influencers typically establish themselves by specializing in specific content areas, and when they partner with brands aligned with their expertise, consumers tend to perceive their recommendations as more credible and trustworthy (Hall, 2016). A social media trends report indicated that 94% of marketers who implemented influencer campaigns considered them effective, and influencer marketing was shown to generate up to eleven times more return on investment (ROI) than traditional advertising (Ahmad, 2018).

Freberg et al. (2011) define influencers as individuals who are followed due to their active social media presence and who shape consumer attitudes through posts, tweets, and blogs. McCracken (1989) similarly describes endorsers as individuals who leverage public recognition to promote consumer goods. In today's digital landscape, influencers function as social media celebrities whose content directly affects how followers evaluate brands, products, and services. The trustworthiness and reach of influencers form the foundation of influencer marketing, as they can shift consumer perceptions and guide purchasing decisions through product-related content.

The effectiveness of influencers is shaped by characteristics such as authenticity, expertise, trustworthiness, and relatability, all of which strengthen their persuasive power and enhance consumer engagement (Liu & Zheng, 2024). The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provides an important theoretical basis for explaining how followers process influencer-generated messages. Expertise often serves as a central cue requiring cognitive evaluation, while physical and social attractiveness function as peripheral cues that influence attitudes with less cognitive effort. Trustworthiness may operate through both central and peripheral pathways. These mechanisms have been widely applied to social media and influencer research (Gong, 2020; Teng et al., 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Influencers who promote brands and products on social media are viewed as credible sources by their followers and can enhance the perceived image of the brands they endorse. Prior work suggests that when influencers are regarded as dependable and appealing, the brand image they convey is strengthened, making the brand appear more reliable and compelling (Ateke, 2013). Kassoway and Anthony (2015) further emphasize that influencers represent long-term relational assets rather than short-term promotional tools, and that follower–influencer

relationships built on trust and engagement contribute significantly to sustained brand reputation and loyalty.

Given these dynamics, influencer characteristics such as physical and social attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and the brand image they foster are expected to play an essential role in shaping consumers' purchase intentions in the model proposed in this study.

3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH MODEL

In line with the purpose of the study, a model consisting of six factors explaining the effects of trust in influencers on brand image, purchase intentions, and purchasing behaviors will be examined. In addition, the hypotheses representing the relationships among the factors included in the model will also be tested.

3.1. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which a source is perceived as trustworthy and honest. The degree to which viewers perceive a source as credible is also associated with trust (Jin et al., 2018). In the study conducted by AlFarraj et al. (2021), it was revealed that influencers' levels of attractiveness and expertise influence online interaction and purchase intention. Additionally, it has been observed that online engagement plays a mediating role between influencers' trustworthiness and purchase intention. Brands associated with perceived credible influencers are characterized by higher levels of brand trust and more positive attitudes, which in turn lead to higher purchase intentions (Koay et al., 2021). Followers generally trust the content shared by influencers (Kim & Kim, 2021), which increases the persuasive impact of influencers. Wong and Wei (2023) highlight that social media influencers (SMIs) have a significant influence on customer behavior in digital environments. These individuals, who create strong influence across social media platforms, have the ability to form authentic and meaningful relationships with their followers. This increases trust and leads to higher levels of active engagement.

Given this consistent evidence, trustworthiness is expected to function as a central antecedent influencing followers' purchase intention in the proposed model.

H_1: Trustworthiness is positively associated with followers' purchase intention.

3.2. Expertise

Expertise stems from the influencer's professional experience and knowledge. Expertise is considered a highly important variable, as it has been examined in numerous studies involving celebrities and influencers (Schouten et al., 2019). Lim et al. (2017) identified that the knowledge possessed by influencers is an important factor influencing purchase intention. For this reason, consumers place greater value on the content shared by influencers perceived as experts in their field. Expertise is a fundamental characteristic that an influencer must possess to be successful, well-recognized, and perceived as a reliable source of information by followers. As stated by Chetioui et al. (2020), "Experts are generally perceived as highly competent and, therefore, more likely to make accurate judgments." Moreover, Ki and Kim (2019) confirmed that expertise can positively influence consumer attitudes and that the desire to imitate influencers often results in stronger purchase intentions. The perceived trustworthiness and expertise of an influencer play a crucial role in establishing trust. Followers are more likely to trust influencers who are knowledgeable and honest about the products or services they endorse. Research on trust transfer indicates that trust placed in influencers can spill over to the brands they promote, particularly when influencer trustworthiness is high (Almahdi et al., 2022). Influencers who possess greater knowledge and are perceived as experts tend to be more persuasive and foster greater brand loyalty. Consumers' purchase intentions and behaviors are positively associated with influencers' perceived competence (AlFarraj et al., 2021).

Accordingly, expertise is expected to positively influence followers' purchase intention, acting as a key evaluative cue in the proposed model.

H$_2$: Expertise is positively associated with followers' purchase intention.

3.3. Parasocial Relationship

The concept of parasocial interaction, proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), represents a one-sided relationship in which a media user forms an interpersonal connection with media characters. Labrecque (2014) defines parasocial interaction as "…an illusory experience in which consumers interact with individuals (i.e., hosts, celebrities, or character-mediated representations) as if they are physically present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship." Lee and Watkins (2016) argued that consumers are more likely to develop parasocial relationships with influencers whom they perceive as relatable or similar to themselves.

Social media influencers use verbal and non-verbal cues in digital environments to create a sense of psychological closeness, sharing similar styles of language and common interests with their followers. This contributes to the development of parasocial relationships by fostering a perceived personal bond similar to friendship. Such perceived closeness significantly increases trust between influencers and their followers. Research has shown that similarities in language, shared interests, and frequent interactions enhance perceived authenticity, which in turn improves followers' psychological well-being and loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2022). Moreover, parasocial relationships have been found to positively influence purchase intentions between influencers and their followers (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015).

Thus, parasocial relationships are expected to enhance followers' purchase intention by strengthening psychological closeness in the model.

H$_3$: Parasocial relationship positively influences followers' purchase intention.

3.4. Brand Image

According to Kotler and Keller (2006), brand image refers to the way consumers perceive and believe in a brand, that is, the associations that arise in the consumer's mind. In the product purchasing process, the brand or brand image is generally the first factor considered before other aspects such as quality, price, and benefits. According to a study by Ateke (2013), the higher the perceived value, the stronger the brand image of the product used by influencers. Godey et al. (2016) emphasized that marketing communication through social media influencers has a positive effect on brand image. This is because the information conveyed by social media influencers is more effective in influencing consumer behavior and purchase intentions. Consumers' trust in a brand strengthens brand loyalty and repurchase intentions. There is a strong relationship between brand image and brand trust; a positive brand image increases consumers' trust in the brand (Gürbüz & Doğan, 2013). Brand image serves as a cognitive shortcut that shapes consumers' evaluations and significantly influences purchase decisions. Influencers contribute to brand image formation by transferring trustworthiness and appeal onto the brands they endorse.

Therefore, brand image is expected to positively influence followers' purchase intention within the proposed model.

H$_4$: Brand image positively influences followers' purchase intention.

3.5. Attitude

Marketing researchers are interested in consumer attitudes, which represent important information for developing successful marketing activities (Schouten et al., 2019). Source trustworthiness has been shown to positively influence consumer attitudes, leading to an increase in purchase intentions. Chan et al. (2013) indicated a positive relationship between attitude and purchase intention when endorsements are perceived as credible. Consumers who hold favorable attitudes toward the trustworthiness of social media influencers tend to exhibit relatively higher purchase intentions. A positive attitude toward a brand, which positively affects purchase intention and behavior, also increases market share (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996). Previous research has demonstrated that influencers' personal characteristics play a significant role in shaping consumers' attitudes toward brands (Ewers, 2017).

Dimensions in the source credibility model—such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—can be associated with consumers' attitudes toward the brand endorsed by the influencer (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2017). According to Özkan and Yerezhep (2023), positive attitudes toward influencers play an important role in increasing consumers' purchase intentions, where trust in the brand acts as a mediator. While influencer trustworthiness directly affects consumer purchase decisions, factors such as expertise and attractiveness create indirect effects.

In line with these findings, attitudes toward influencers are expected to shape key variables in the model, including trustworthines, expertise, parasocial relationship, and brand image.

H$_{5a}$: Attitude is positively associated with trustworthiness.

H$_{5b}$: Attitude is positively associated with expertise.

H$_{5c}$: Attitude is positively associated with parasocial relationship.

H$_{5d}$: Attitude is positively associated with brand image.

3.6. Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness is also defined as a pleasing appearance (Soekmawati et al., 2022). Attractiveness is particularly related to physical appearance. Therefore, if a person is perceived as elegant and beautiful/handsome, they are considered attractive (Ohanian, 1990). In the study by Çolakoğlu and Çetinkaya (2025), it was shown that influencers' physical attractiveness

positively affects the parasocial relationships formed with their followers. Specifically, factors such as physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were found to have a direct and positive effect on parasocial interaction. Influencers' physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise are considered antecedents of parasocial relationship formation. Physical attractiveness operates as a peripheral cue that shapes followers' impressions and influences their perceptions of trustworthines and brand-related judgments.

Accordingly, physical attractiveness is expected to positively affect trustworthines, expertise, parasocial relationships, and brand image in the model.

H$_{6a}$: Physical attractiveness is positively associated with trustworthines.

H$_{6b}$: Physical attractiveness is positively associated with expertise.

H$_{6c}$: Physical attractiveness positively influences parasocial relationship.

H$_{6d}$: Physical attractiveness is positively associated with brand image.

3.7. Social Attractiveness

Social attractiveness refers to the positive feelings an individual has toward those with whom they socially interact, and is considered an important factor in examining individual behaviors in many studies conducted within the field of social media (Akdeniz & Uyar, 2021). The sense of homophily not only promotes information-seeking behavior but also strengthens the development of personal relationships and information sharing between influencers and followers (Bu et al., 2022). The concept of homophily, which defines the perceived similarity between influencers and their followers, is a significant element that greatly influences the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies (Gross et al., 2023; Ki et al., 2023). Social attractiveness, characterized by traits such as relatability and likability, plays a critical role in the construction of trust. Influencers who engage in sincere interactions and are perceived as socially appealing by their followers are more effective in building trust. Such interactions often lead to higher levels of brand loyalty among followers (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Therefore, social attractiveness is expected to serve as an important antecedent of trustworthiness, expertise, parasocial relationship, and brand image in the proposed model.

H$_{7a}$: Social attractiveness is positively associated with trustworthiness.

H₇ᵦ: Social attractiveness is positively associated with expertise.

H₇𝒸: Social attractiveness positively influences parasocial relationship.

H₇𝒹: Social attractiveness is positively associated with brand image.

These hypothesized relationships, reflecting the combined influence of influencer characteristics and perceived attributes, are visually represented in the structural pathways shown in Figure 1.

Influencer Characteristics   Perceived Attributes   Behavioral Intention
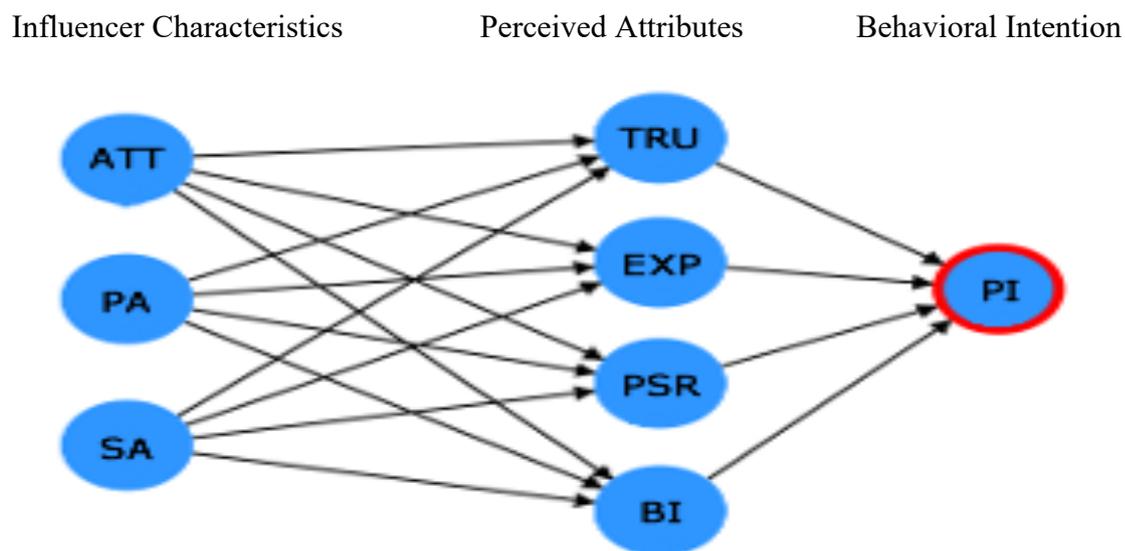
ATT: Attitude, **PA**: Physical Attractiveness, **SA**: Social Attractiveness, **TRU**: Trustworthiness, **EXP**: Expertise, **PSR**: Parasocial Relationship, **BI**: Brand Image, **PI**: Purchase Intention

Figure 1. Research Model

4. METHOD

4.1. Data Collection and Sample

A comprehensive literature review was initially conducted in the study, and based on this review, a data collection instrument was developed. After obtaining expert opinions, measurement items that best suited the purpose of the research were prepared. The first part of the questionnaire consists of 10 demographic questions, while the second part includes 28 statements measured using an 11-point Likert scale (0: Strongly disagree, 10: Strongly agree). Thus, the questionnaire consists of a total of 38 items. Figure 1 presents the research model, and Table 1 includes the factors derived from the literature and the measurement items representing these factors.

Table 1.
Constructs and Measurement Items

Construct	Item Code	Measurement Item	Source
Attitude (ATT)	ATT1	I follow influencers who I believe have a similar worldview to mine.	Akdoğan (2019); Eru et al. (2018)
	ATT2	I follow influencers who treat others the way I do.	
	ATT3	I follow influencers who share similar personal characteristics with me.	
	ATT4	I follow influencers who share my values.	
Physical Attractiveness (PA)	PA1	I tend to follow influencers whom I find physically attractive.	Masuda et al. (2022); Eru et al. (2018)
	PA2	Physical attractiveness is not important for me when deciding to follow an influencer.	
	PA3	I follow influencers whose physical features (e.g., height/weight) resemble mine.	
	PA4	I follow influencers whose style and appearance I find elegant or stylish.	
	PA5	The physical appeal of an influencer is important for me when choosing to follow them.	
Social Attractiveness (SA)	SA1	I follow influencers whom I feel I could be friends with.	Masuda et al. (2022); Türkoğlu (2019)
	SA2	I would like to meet the influencers I follow in person.	
	SA3	I feel connected to the influencers I follow.	
Trustworthiness (TRU)	TRU1	I follow influencers who share consistent and accurate information.	Akdoğan (2019); Algharabat & Rana (2021)
	TRU2	Influencers who provide constructive criticism appear more trustworthy to me.	
	TRU3	Even if I find an influencer insincere, I may still continue to follow them.	
Expertise (EXP)	EXP1	I believe the influencers I follow are knowledgeable and competent.	Türkoğlu (2019); Masuda et al. (2022)
	EXP2	I follow influencers who are experienced enough to make claims in their area.	
	EXP3	I believe the influencers I follow are skilled and qualified in their field.	
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	PSI1	I feel upset when an influencer I follow makes a mistake.	Masuda et al. (2022); Özer et al. (2021)
	PSI2	I eagerly wait for the influencers I follow to post new content.	
	PSI3	If I see news about an influencer I follow in a magazine or newspaper, I read it.	
	PSI4	I would like to meet the influencers I follow in real life.	
Brand Image (BI)	BI1	I believe the brand or product promoted by influencers I follow is good.	Nurhandayani et al. (2019); Bilgin (2018); Canoğlu et al. (2021)
	BI2	If I trust an influencer, I am more likely to consider purchasing from the brand they promote.	
	BI3	I feel that the brand or product promoted by influencers I follow suits me.	
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	When shopping, I am more likely to buy products promoted by influencers I follow than other products.	Türkoğlu (2019); Akdoğan (2019); Canoğlu et al. (2021)
	PI2	Even if I already have information about a product, I consider influencers' opinions before purchasing.	
	PI3	After watching an influencer I follow, I am likely to purchase the product or service they recommend.	

Source: Sakarya et al. (2023).

The sample of the study consists of social media users who follow at least one influencer. Data were gathered from individuals who engage with influencers on social media platforms and voluntarily participated by accessing the online survey link distributed through these channels. A total of 306 questionnaires were collected during the data-gathering process. After screening the responses, 17 questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete or inconsistent answers, leaving 289 valid responses for the analysis. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and respondents completed the questionnaire at their own convenience. This approach allowed the study to reach a diverse group of users with varying levels of social media engagement. The demographic characteristics of the participants included in the final sample are reported in Table 2.

Table 2.
Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Category	Number of Participants	Participant Rate
Gender		
Female	161	55.70%
Male	128	44.30%
Age		
18-24	144	49.80%
25-34	118	24.30%
35-44	18	6.20%
45-54	7	2.40%
55-64	2	0.40%
Education		
Primary	4	1.40%
High school	32	11.10%
University student	70	24.20%
Associate degree	35	12.10%
Bachelor's	114	39.40%
Graduate & above	34	11.80%
Marital status		
Married	76	26.30%
Single	213	43.9%
Occupation		
Student	107	37.0%
Private Sector	89	30.80%
Public Sector	25	8.70%
Retired	5	1.70%
Worker	28	9.70%
Self-employed	4	1.40%
Not employed	31	10.70%
Type of influencer followed		
Professional influencer	162	56.10%
Celebrity / Expert	80	27.70%
Other	47	16.30%
Time on social media per day		
< 1 hour	27	9.30%
1-2 hours	134	46.40%
3-4 hours	100	34.60%
5-6 hours	18	6.20%
> 6 hours	10	3.50%
Posts per day		
0-2	260	90.0%
3-5	22	7.60%
6-8	6	2.10%
9-11	0	0.00%
12+	1	0.30%
Comments per day		
0-2	255	88.20%
3-5	23	8.0%
6-8	6	2.10%
9-11	2	0.70%
12+	3	1.0%
Purchases on social media (last 3 months)		
0-2	144	49.80%
3-5	87	30.10%
6-8	45	15.60%
9-11	7	2.40%
12+	6	2.10%

Of the participants, 161 were female (55.70%) and 128 were male (44.30%). In terms of age distribution, 49.83% were between 18–24 years old, 40.83% were between 25–34 years old, 6.23% were between 35–44 years old, 2.42% were between 45–54 years old, and 0.69% were between 55–64 years old.

4.2. Data Analysis

To minimize potential common method bias (CMB), items belonging to the same constructs were intentionally mixed within the questionnaire and later reorganized during the analysis phase. Participants were informed that their responses would remain anonymous, and neutral, non-leading statements were used to reduce social desirability bias. In addition, common method bias was statistically assessed using Kock's (2015) full collinearity VIF criterion. All full collinearity VIF values were lower than the recommended cutoff of 3.3, indicating that common method bias does not pose a significant threat to the validity of the data.

The research model and hypotheses were analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach. PLS-SEM is a multivariate technique that enables the modeling of causal relationships between observed and latent variables. It was selected in this study because it is well suited to complex model structures, exploratory research designs, and small to medium sample sizes. Moreover, PLS-SEM does not require multivariate normality assumptions and provides robust estimation performance under non-normal data conditions. All analyses were conducted using SmartPLS software (version 4.0.9.2).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Validity and Reliability of the Research Model

In the first stage of the analysis, the reliability and validity of the constructs included in the study were examined. The measurement model was assessed in terms of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Internal consistency reliability evaluates the extent to which the indicators consistently represent the same construct. For this purpose, Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha values were used, both of which are expected to exceed the threshold value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 1998).

Convergent validity reflects the degree to which the indicators of a construct are correlated with one another. In this context, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be greater than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As a result of the analyses, the indicators PA2 and PA3 under the Physical Attractiveness construct and TRU3 under the Trustworthiness construct, with factor loadings below 0.70, were removed from the measurement model.

The final validity and reliability results of the measurement model are presented in Figure 2 and Table 3.
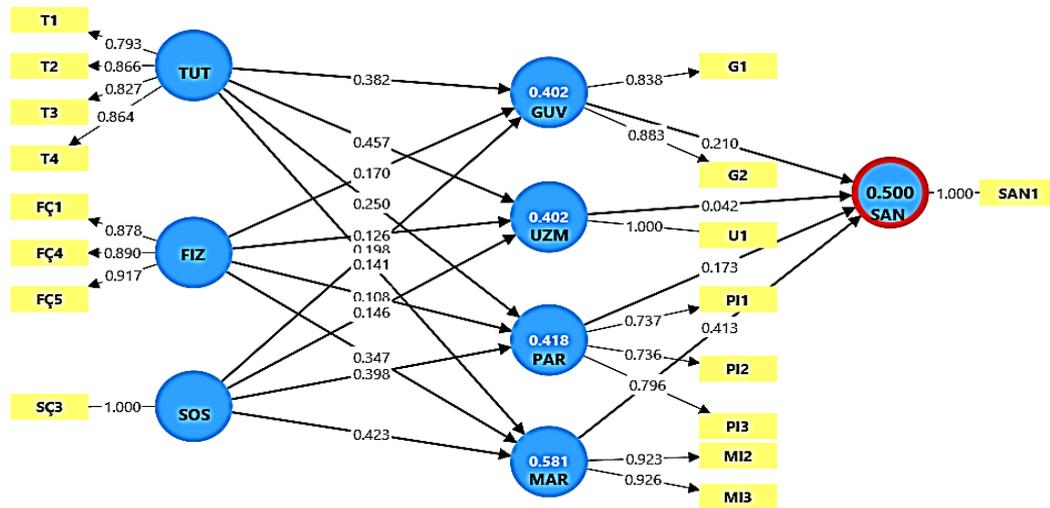
TUT:ATT: Attitude, FIZ:PA: Physical Attractiveness, SOS:SA: Social Attractiveness, GUV:TRU: Trustworthiness, UZM:EXP: Expertise, PAR:PSR: Parasocial Relationship, MAR:BI: Brand Image, SAN:PI: Purchase Intention

Figure 2. PLS-SEM Measurement Model Output (SmartPLS)

Table 3.
Measurement Model Results

Factor	Item Code	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Physical Attractiveness (PA)	PA1	0.879	0.878	0.924	0.801
	PA4	0.890			
	PA5	0.917			
Trustworthiness (TRU)	TRU1	0.838	0.653	0.851	0.741
	TRU2	0.883			
Brand Image (BI)	BI2	0.923	0.864	0.917	0.786
	BI3	0.926			
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	PSR1	0.737	0.720	0.826	0.543
	PSR2	0.736			
	PSR3	0.796			
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	1.000	-	-	-
Social Attractiveness (SA)	SA1	1.000	-	-	-
Attitude (ATT)	ATT1	0.793	0.859	0.904	0.702
	ATT2	0.865			
	ATT3	0.828			
	ATT4	0.864			
Expertise (EXP)	EXP1	1.000	-	-	-

For discriminant validity, the HTMT analysis was conducted and the items SA2 and SA3, EXP2 and EXP3, PI2 and PI3 were removed from the model because they produced values exceeding the critical threshold of 0.90. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
Discriminant Validity (HTMT Criterion)

	PA	TRU	BI	PSI	PI	SA	ATT	EXP
PA								
TRU	0.584							
BI	0.719	0.780						
PSI	0.550	0.645	0.797					
PI	0.539	0.689	0.723	0.632				
SA	0.507	0.616	0.737	0.742	0.469			

ATT	0.587	0.780	0.663	0.716	0.510	0.618	
EXP	0.453	0.890	0.608	0.534	0.498	0.474	0.650

Additionally, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was applied to assess discriminant validity. According to this criterion, the square root of the AVE value for each construct should be greater than its correlations with other constructs. The discriminant validity results based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion are provided in Table 5.

Table 5.
Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

	PA	TRU	BI	PSI	PI	SA	ATT	EXP
PA	0.895							
TRU	0.463	0.861						
BI	0.623	0.577	0.925					
PSI	0.429	0.439	0.588	0.757				
PI	0.518	0.554	0.659	0.527	1.000			
SA	0.480	0.503	0.672	0.596	0.469	1.000		
ATT	0.520	0.586	0.568	0.538	0.474	0.584	0.838	
EXP	0.434	0.719	0.554	0.444	0.498	0.474	0.608	1.000

5.2. Evaluation of the Structural Model

After establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the structural model was analyzed to test the hypotheses. The evaluation of the structural model was conducted using the R^2, Q^2, f^2, and VIF criteria.

Based on Table 6, it was determined that trustworthiness explained 40% of its variance, brand image 58%, parasocial interaction 42%, purchase intention 50%, and expertise 40%.

Table 6.
Model Explained Variance

Factor	R^2	Level	Q^2	Level
Trustworthiness (TRU)	0.402	Medium	0.382	Medium
Brand Image (BI)	0.581	Medium	0.563	Medium
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	0.418	Medium	0.397	Medium
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.500	Medium	0.330	Medium
Expertise (EXP)	0.402	Medium	0,380	Medium

According to Table 6, the model demonstrates a moderate to substantial level of predictive power across all variables.

After evaluating the structural model, the effect sizes (f^2) were examined to determine the magnitude of each predictor's contribution to its respective endogenous variable, as presented in Table 7. According to the f^2 values shown in Table 7, Physical Attractiveness (PA) has no effect on explaining Parasocial Interaction (PSI), and Expertise (EXP) has no effect on explaining Purchase Intention (PI). Additionally, Table 7 indicates that the relationships PA → Brand Image (BI), BI → Purchase Intention (PI), Social Attractiveness (SA) → Parasocial Interaction (PSI), Attitude (ATT) → Trustworthiness (TRU), and ATT → Expertise (EXP)

demonstrate medium-level effects. Furthermore, the VIF values in the table are all below the threshold of 5, indicating that there is no multicollinearity problem in the structural model.

For the assessment of structural model fit, SmartPLS calculates the Geodesic Distance (d_G), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Chi-Square, and the Squared Euclidean Distance (d_ULS) values. The model fit indices are presented in Table 8.

Table 7.
Effect Size of the Model

Relationship	f^2	Level	VIF
Physical Attractiveness (PA) → Trustworthiness (TRU)	0.033	Small	1.466
Physical Attractiveness (PA) → Brand Image (BI)	0.196	Medium	1.466
Physical Attractiveness (PA) → Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	0.014	No Effect	1.466
Physical Attractiveness (PA) → Expertise (EXP)	0.018	Small	1.466
Trustworthiness (TRU) → Purchase Intention (PI)	0.038	Small	2.295
Brand Image (BI) → Purchase Intention (PI)	0.175	Medium	1.950
Parasocial Interaction (PSI) → Purchase Intention (PI)	0.038	Small	1.583
Social Attractiveness (SA) → Trustworthiness (TRU)	0.040	Small	1.623
Social Attractiveness (SA) → Brand Image (BI)	0.263	Medium	1.623
Social Attractiveness (SA) → Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	0.168	Medium	1.623
Social Attractiveness (SA) → Expertise (EXP)	0.022	Small	1.623
Attitude (ATT) → Trustworthiness (TRU)	0.143	Medium	1.710
Attitude (ATT) → Brand Image (BI)	0.028	Small	1.710
Attitude (ATT) → Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	0.063	Small	1.710
Attitude (ATT) → Expertise (EXP)	0.204	Medium	1.710
Expertise (EXP) → Purchase Intention (PI)	0.002	No Effect	2.228

Table 8.
Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value
SRMR	0.074<0.08
d_ULS	0.833>0.05
d_G	0.379>0.05
Chi-square	688.402
NFI	0.765<0.80

Upon examining the model fit values in Table 8, it is observed that the NFI value is close to 0.80, and the remaining indices fall within the acceptable fit thresholds. Tenenhaus et al. (2004) proposed the Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) index as an overall measure of model fit. GoF evaluates the performance of both the measurement model and the structural model and ranges between 0 and 1. A GoF value below 0.10 indicates poor fit, values between 0.10 and 0.25 indicate moderate fit, values between 0.25 and 0.36 indicate good fit, and values above 0.36 indicate very good fit. In this study, the GoF value was calculated as 0.56, indicating that the model has a very good level of overall model fit.

The results of the hypotheses tested in the study are presented in Figure 3 and Table 9.
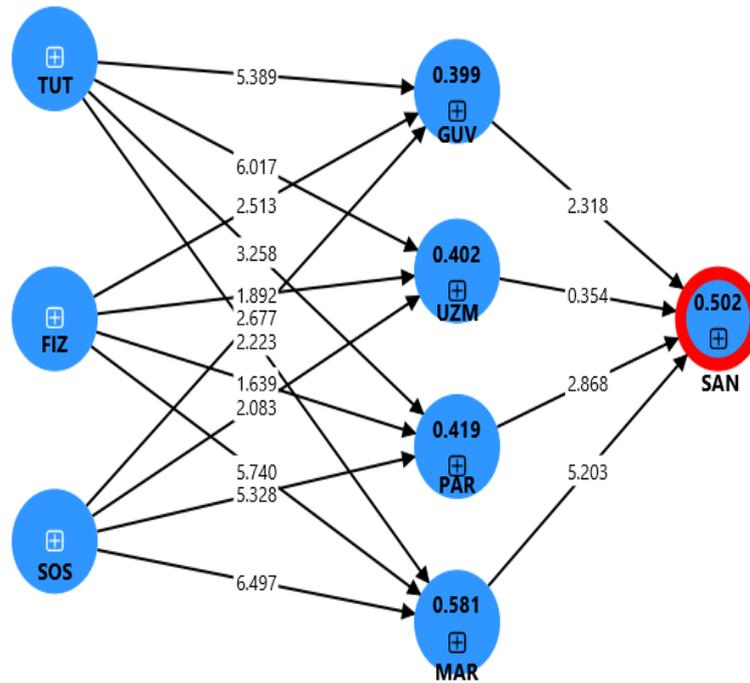
TUT:ATT: Attitude, **FIZ:PA**: Physical Attractiveness, **SOS:SA**: Social Attractiveness, **GUV:TRU**: Trustworthiness, **UZM:EXP**: Expertise, **PAR:PSR**: Parasocial Relationship, **MAR:BI**: Brand Image, **SAN:PI**: Purchase Intention

Figure 3. KEKK-SEM Measurement Model Results (t-values) – SmartPLS Output

Table 9.
Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Decision
H_1	TRU → PI	0.213	2.318	P<0.05**	Supported
H_2	EXP → PI	0.038	0.354	0.723ad	Not Supported
H_3	PSI → PI	0.178	2.868	P<0.01***	Supported
H_4	BI → PI	0.410	5.203	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{5a}	ATT → TRU	0.384	5.389	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{5b}	ATT → EXP	0.456	6.017	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{5c}	ATT → PSI	0.250	3.258	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{5d}	ATT → BI	0.141	2.223	P<0.05**	Supported
H_{6a}	PA → TRU	0.167	2.513	P<0.05**	Supported
H_{6b}	PA → EXP	0.126	1.892	0.058*	Supported
H_{6c}	PA → PSI	0.109	1.639	0.101ad	Not Supported
H_{6d}	PA → BI	0.347	5.740	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{7a}	SA → TRU	0.196	2.677	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{7b}	SA → EXP	0.147	2.083	P<0.05**	Supported
H_{7c}	SA → PSI	0.398	5.328	P<0.01***	Supported
H_{7d}	SA → BI	0.424	6.497	P<0.01***	Supported

Note: *$p < 0.01$, $p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.10$, ns: not significant.

As shown in Table 9, all hypotheses except H2 and H6c were supported. Accordingly, Brand Image significantly and positively affects Purchase Intention (t = 5.203, p < 0.01). A one-unit increase in brand image increases purchase intention by 0.410 units.

Attitude significantly and positively affects Trustworthiness (t = 5.389, p < 0.01), Expertise (t = 6.017, p < 0.01), and Brand Image (t = 2.223, p < 0.05). A one-unit increase in attitude increases trustworthiness by 0.384 units, expertise by 0.456 units, parasocial interaction by 0.250 units, and brand image by 0.141 units.

Physical Attractiveness significantly and positively affects Trustworthiness (t = 2.513, p < 0.05), Expertise (t = 1.892, p < 0.10), and Brand Image (t = 5.740, p < 0.01). A one-unit increase in physical attractiveness increases trustworthiness by 0.167 units, expertise by 0.126 units, and brand image by 0.347 units.

Social Attractiveness significantly and positively affects Parasocial Interaction (t = 5.328, p < 0.01) and Brand Image (t = 6.497, p < 0.01). A one-unit increase in social attractiveness increases parasocial interaction by 0.398 units and brand image by 0.424 units.

The effects of Brand Image, Trustworthiness, and Parasocial Interaction on Purchase Intention are 0.410, 0.213, and 0.178, respectively. The highest path coefficients are observed between Brand Image → Purchase Intention, Attitude → Expertise, and Social Attractiveness → Brand Image.

The indirect effects are presented in Table 10.

Table 10.
Indirect Effects

|	Path Coefficient	t- value	p value
PA → PSI → PI	0.019	1.363	0.173ns
PA → BI → PI	0.142	3.521	**p<0.01***
SA → EXP → PI	0.006	0.319	0.750ns
PA → TRU→ PI	0.036	1.533	0.125ns
ATT →EXP → PI	0.017	0.345	0.730ns
SA → PSI→ PI	0.071	2.655	**p<0.01***
SA → BI→ PI	0.174	4.270	**p<0.01***
ATT → PSI -→ PI	0.045	2.044	**p<0.05**
SA → EXP → PI	0.042	1.878	p<0.10*
ATT → BI → PI	0.058	2.049	**p<0.05**
ATT → EXP→ PI	0.082	2.074	**p<0.05**
PA → EXP → PI	0.005	0.312	0.755ns

Note: *p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.10, ns: not significant.

The findings indicate that the Brand Image of the endorsed product plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between Social Attractiveness of the influencer and consumers' Purchase Intention. This suggests that social attractiveness not only reflects the personal appeal of the influencer but also shapes the perceived value and trustworthiness of the brand. While social attractiveness increases consumers' interest in the brand, it also indirectly affects purchase intention through brand image.

Additionally, the indirect effect of Physical Attractiveness on purchase intention through brand image is another important result. The influencer's physical attractiveness enhances the

perceived quality and desirability of the brand, which in turn positively influences consumers' purchasing decisions.

Moreover, the results in Table 10 show that Parasocial Interaction (PSI) also plays a noteworthy mediating role. Parasocial relationships formed with influencers enable followers to establish a deeper emotional connection with brands, thereby shaping their purchase intentions. This demonstrates that influencer–brand associations on social media may generate both direct and indirect effects on consumer behavior.
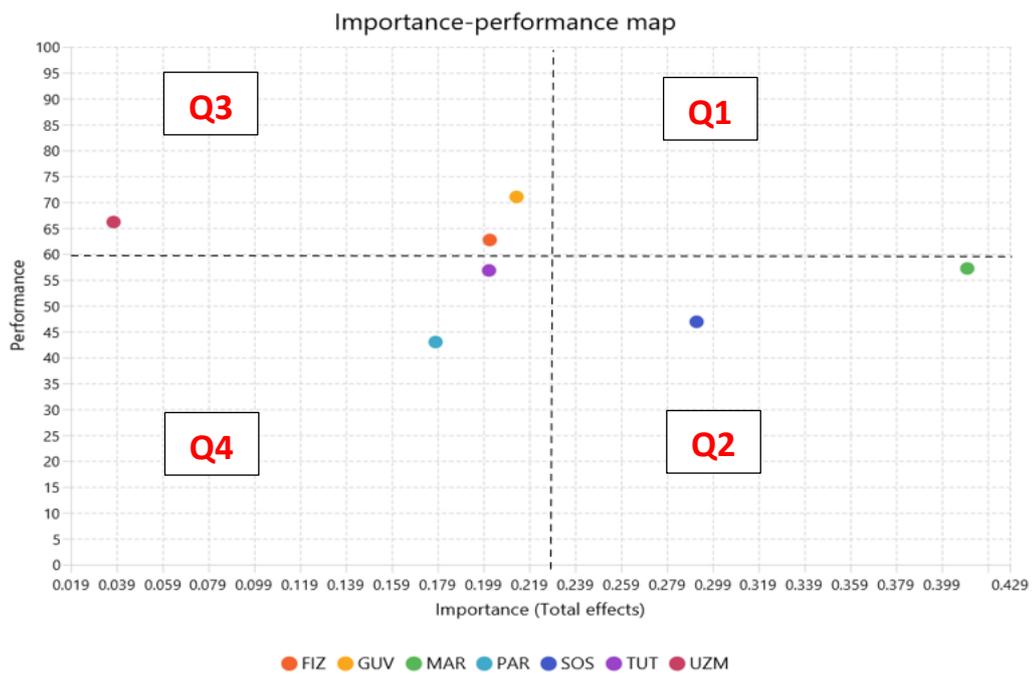
TUT:ATT: Attitude, **FIZ:PA**: Physical Attractiveness, **SOS:SA**: Social Attractiveness, **GUV:TRU**: Trustworthiness, **UZM:EXP**: Expertise, **PAR:PSR**: Parasocial Relationship, **MAR:BI**: Brand Image, **SAN:PI**: Purchase Intention

Figure 4. Importance–Performance Map of the Variables Influencing Purchase Intention

In the study, an Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) was also conducted to evaluate the importance and performance of influencer characteristics affecting purchase intention. This method analyzes the importance (external latent variables) and performance (internal latent variable) levels perceived by individuals. Essentially, IPMA visualizes which areas should be prioritized to use organizational resources more effectively. IPMA presents the importance and performance of latent variables graphically. As shown in Figure 4, the map is divided into four quadrants (Sarstedt et al., 2024):

- Q1 – Keep Up the Good Work (High Importance, High Performance): Areas that should be maintained at their current performance level.

- Q2 – Concentrate Here (High Importance, Low Performance): Characteristics that are highly important but perform poorly. These should be prioritized for improvement.
- Q3 – Possible Overkill (Low Importance, High Performance): Performance decreases in these characteristics will not significantly affect the target construct.
- Q4 – Low Priority (Low Importance, Low Performance): Characteristics that are low in both importance and performance.

In the Q2 category, variables such as brand image and influencers' social attractiveness emerge as areas that require strategic improvement. These variables are characterized by high importance but low performance, indicating that brands need to develop more targeted and efficient marketing strategies. Taking improvement actions in these areas can strengthen brand perception and enhance the effectiveness of collaborations with influencers.

In the Q3 category, physical attractiveness of influencers, influencer trustworthiness, and influencer expertise are high-performing but low-importance factors. Instead of investing heavily in these areas, it would be more efficient for brands to focus on strategic elements with higher importance. Concentrating resources in the right areas will be more effective for achieving long-term brand success.

In the Q4 category, attitudes toward influencers and parasocial relationships with influencers appear to be factors that can currently be placed in a secondary position within brand strategies. However, improving these variables in the long term may help brands establish stronger emotional ties with their target audiences. Although these factors are presently less emphasized, they may become more influential in future strategic planning, particularly in optimizing brand management and influencer strategies.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the effects of several influencer-related factors—attitudes toward influencers, physical and social attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, parasocial interaction, and the brand image of endorsed products—on consumers' purchase intentions. In the proposed structural model, attitudes, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness were conceptualized as external variables, while expertise, trustworthiness, parasocial interaction, and brand image were positioned as mediating internal constructs influencing purchase intention. The hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that the proposed model demonstrates an acceptable level of fit, with two hypotheses not supported. The strongest relationships emerged between attitudes

toward influencers and perceived expertise, attractiveness and brand image, and brand image and purchase intention. Additionally, the Importance–Performance Map Analysis highlighted brand image and social attractiveness as strategic priority areas for improvement.

The literature emphasizes that influencer expertise is an important determinant of purchase intention (Lim et al., 2017; Ki & Kim, 2019; AlFarraj et al., 2021), although some studies have reported non-significant effects (Avcı & Yıldız, 2019). The findings of this study also show that expertise is a meaningful component shaping consumer responses. The positive effect of trustworthiness on purchase intention is well documented (Özkan & Yerezhep, 2023; Erdoğan & Özcan, 2020). Other studies have similarly demonstrated that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness significantly influence purchase behavior (Kazancı Sunaoğlu & Özdemir, 2023). This study reveals that social attractiveness exerts an indirect effect on purchase intention through parasocial interaction, brand image, and trust, underscoring the importance of relational mechanisms in influencer marketing.

Research examining gender differences in influencer characteristics (Yıldız, 2021), as well as evidence showing that attractiveness and similarity enhance trust (Demirdağ, 2023), align with the findings of this study. Here, physical attractiveness does not directly influence purchase intention but instead affects it indirectly through brand image. This result offers an important marketing insight: visual appeal alone is not sufficient; it becomes more influential when it strengthens the perceived symbolic value of the brand.

The roles of parasocial interaction and trust in shaping purchase intention have also been supported by prior research (Köksal Araç, 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Şenbabaoğlu Danacı, 2024). The study finds that parasocial interaction and trust exert direct effects on purchase intention, while physical and social attractiveness operate through indirect pathways. Previous work showing that relational commitment, expertise, physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and self-disclosure influence consumer behavior (Chen et al., 2022) is also consistent with these results.

A considerable body of research has shown that influencer-based marketing strengthens brand image, thereby increasing purchase intention (Godey et al., 2016; Atılgan & Yükselen, 2018; Değirmenci & Durmaz, 2020). This study similarly confirms that brand image is one of the strongest predictors of purchase intention. This finding suggests that an influencer's role in the

marketing process extends beyond mere appearance to encompass symbolic meaning, trust, and identity transfer attached to the brand.

Overall, this study provides an integrated framework explaining how influencers' personal traits (physical and social attractiveness) and influencer-specific qualities (expertise, trustworthiness, and parasocial relational strength) shape consumer decisions. From a marketing perspective, the results confirm that influencers—often regarded as modern opinion leaders—play a central role in enhancing perceived brand value and influencing consumer decision-making both directly and indirectly. The IPMA results further indicate that strategic investments in brand image and social attractiveness could enhance marketing effectiveness.

Future studies may enrich the proposed model by incorporating additional variables, employing different methodological approaches, or analyzing larger samples to strengthen generalizability. Given the rapid evolution of influencer marketing within social media environments, continued research in this area remains essential. This study is expected to offer a theoretical foundation and serve as a guide for future research endeavors.

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