# The Rise of Micro-Social Media Influencers: Exploring Their Impact on University Students' Purchasing Intentions[*]

**(Research Article)**

*Mikro-Fenomenlerin Yükselişi: Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Satın Alma Niyetleri Üzerindeki Etkilerinin Araştırılması*

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## ABSTRACT

*Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as important entities in the digital marketing landscape, profoundly shaping consumer behavior, particularly among younger demographics such as university students. The aim of the study is to investigate the impact of SMIs on the purchasing intentions of university students, exploring the influence of key attributes such as perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and the strength of parasocial interactions (PSIs). Through a comprehensive online survey conducted with 358 university students, the paper identifies significant relationships between these SMIs attributes and the students' purchasing decisions. The findings reveal that SMIs' perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness directly enhance their persuasive power, while PSIs serve as a crucial mediator, further solidifying the emotional bonds between SMIs and their followers. Moreover, the paper underscores the long-term effects of influencer marketing, showing that strong purchasing intentions fostered by SMIs can lead to sustained consumer loyalty. These insights emphasize the strategic value of leveraging SMI marketing for brands aiming to engage with young, digitally savvy consumers, highlighting the importance of selecting the right SMIs who can build authentic and meaningful connections with their audience.*

## ÖZET

*Sosyal medya fenomenleri (SMF'ler), dijital pazarlama alanında önemli bir rol oynamakta ve özellikle üniversite öğrencileri gibi gençler arasında tüketici davranışlarını derinden etkilemektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, SMF'lerin üniversite öğrencilerinin satın alma niyetleri üzerindeki etkisini ve algılanan çekicilik, güvenilirlik ile parasosyal etkileşimler gibi faktörlerle ilişkisini incelemektir. Araştırma, 358 üniversite öğrencisi ile gerçekleştirilen çevrimiçi bir anket aracılığıyla verilerin toplanması ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, SMF'lerin özellikleri ile öğrencilerin satın alma kararları arasında önemli ilişkilerin bulunduğunu göstermektedir. Özellikle, SMF'lerin algılanan çekiciliği ve güvenilirliği, ikna edici güçlerini artırmakta; parasosyal etkileşimler ise, fenomenler ile takipçileri arasındaki bağı güçlendiren önemli bir aracı işlevi üstlenmektedir. Ayrıca, bu çalışma fenomen pazarlamanın uzun vadeli etkilerini vurgulayarak, SMF'ler tarafından oluşturulan güçlü satın alma niyetlerinin sürdürülebilir tüketici sadakatine yol açabileceğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bulgular, genç ve dijital okuryazar tüketicilerle etkileşim kurmayı hedefleyen markalar için fenomen pazarlamanın stratejik değerini vurgulamakta ve doğru fenomenlerin seçilmesinin önemini öne çıkarmaktadır; bu fenomenler, izleyicileriyle otantik ve anlamlı bağlantılar kurabilmektedir.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

SMI marketing has emerged as a central component of digital marketing strategies, utilizing social media to efficiently reach wide audiences. Companies collaborate with SMIs on online platforms (such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok etc.) to produce online content that appears more authentic and relatable to their audiences. This approach not only enhances brand exposure but also has a direct impact on consumers' purchasing behavior (Coutinho et al., 2023). By capitalizing on the trust and credibility that SMIs have developed with their followers, businesses can foster higher engagement and brand loyalty, presenting a cost-effective alternative to conventional advertising. Social media has thus become a vital tool in modern marketing, where SMIs significantly shape consumer preferences. SMIs, online content producers with large number of followers on online platforms such, significantly impact consumer purchasing decisions by delivering content that is seen as more authentic and relatable compared to conventional advertisements. (Casaló et al., 2018; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Sesar et al., 2022).

In today's marketing landscape, SMIs have become vital assets, providing brands with direct access to highly engaged and specific audiences. According to Lin et al. (2018), an effective strategy for utilizing SMIs in marketing campaigns involves five key steps: planning, recognition, alignment, motivation, and coordination. This approach highlights the critical need for aligning the influencer's identity and values with the brand being promoted to maintain authenticity and relevance. Similarly, Erz et al. (2018) underscore the significance of hashtags and other social media features in extending the reach of influencer-generated content, thereby increasing its influence on consumer behavior.

SMIs can be categorized by their follower count and the type of content they produce, each category wielding varying degrees of influence over their audience (De Veirman et al., 2017). Mega SMIs, those with over a million followers, offer extensive reach but may lack the close-knit connection that smaller SMIs maintain with their audience (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Macro SMIs, typically with 50,000 to 1 million followers, strike a balance by having broad appeal while still effectively engaging specific audience segments (Abreu, 2019). Micro-SMIs, with 10,000 to 50,000 followers, are known for fostering personal relationships with their audience while reaching a considerable number of potential customers. Gerlich et al. (2023) found that micro-SMIs, particularly those personally known to their followers, have a stronger influence on purchasing decisions compared to macro-SMIs or celebrities. Factors such as trust, familiarity, and relatability contribute to the persuasiveness of micro-SMIs, making their recommendations appear more credible. These insights suggest that micro-SMIs offer significant potential for brands seeking authentic consumer engagement.

The rapid growth of influencer marketing, which capitalizes on SMIs' credibility and reach to promote goods and services, has been remarkable in recent years. Ge and Gretzel (2018) observed that SMIs effectively boost consumer engagement and brand loyalty using interactive, visually appealing content, with emojis playing a pivotal role in enhancing emotional appeal, credibility, and audience interaction. Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs are often perceived as more approachable and authentic due to their perceived personal connections with followers. By curating content that resonates with their audience, SMIs present themselves as genuine and relatable. This authenticity fosters trust, making their endorsements more convincing than those of traditional celebrities (Cheah et al., 2024).

SMIs are now integral to brand strategies, especially for targeting digitally savvy and younger consumers, such as university students, due to their ability to create bonds and parasocial interactions (PSIs) with their audience (Dutta & Bhattacharya, 2023). Qualities like attractiveness and trustworthiness play a significant role in an influencer's ability to engage their followers, thereby driving both purchasing intentions and long-term loyalty. This makes SMIs particularly influential among younger demographics, who prioritize personal connections and authentic endorsements (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). As early adopters of new media and trends, university students are especially susceptible to the influence of SMIs, further emphasizing the importance of studying this demographic within the context of SMI marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Given the pervasive role of social media in the lives of university students, it is essential to understand how SMIs impact their purchasing behavior. The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of SMIs on university students' purchasing intentions. The paper explores how the perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness of SMIs help build emotional connections with consumers. This paper addresses a significant research gap in the literature on influencer marketing by focusing on the mediating role of parasocial interactions (PSIs) in the relationship between influencer characteristics and consumer behavior. While prior studies have largely examined influencer attributes such as attractiveness and trustworthiness in relation to purchase intentions, few have explored the psychological mechanisms that underlie these effects. Specifically, the emotional and relational dimension of consumer-influencer dynamics—particularly PSIs—has received limited empirical attention. By integrating PSIs as a mediating variable, this study contributes a novel perspective that deepens our understanding of how emotional bonds formed with social media influencers influence consumer decision-making. The research offers a nuanced

analysis of how influencer traits—especially their capacity to foster perceived intimacy and trust—impact purchase intentions and loyalty among university students. Using a quantitative methodology, the study provides evidence-based insights with practical implications for optimizing influencer marketing strategies targeting younger demographics in digital environments.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have investigated the factors that determine an influencer's effectiveness in shaping consumer behavior. Baig and Shahzad (2022) found that the credibility of SMIs—particularly in terms of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—plays a statistically significant role in influencing consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes, trustworthiness being the most important factor, followed by expertise and attractiveness. These dimensions help shape followers' attitudes and purchasing decisions, especially within the fashion sector. Similarly, Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) emphasize that SMIs derive much of their influence from their perceived credibility, which enhances their ability to engage audiences and affect consumer behavior. Both studies suggest that the power of SMIs lies in their capacity to build authentic relationships with followers, thereby affecting both immediate consumer decisions and fostering long-term brand loyalty.

Mir and Salo (2024) demonstrated that an influencer's physical attractiveness and familiarity significantly shape consumer responses. Physical attractiveness enhances likability and captures attention, while familiarity—defined as the perceived similarity between the SMI and the audience—helps build a sense of connection and identification. These characteristics are essential in influencing followers' attitudes toward endorsed brands and their purchasing behavior. Additionally, De Veirman et al. (2017) found that an influencer's perceived popularity, often indicated by their follower count, can enhance credibility and the effectiveness of their endorsements. However, this relationship is complex; while a large following can signal popularity, it may also lead to perceptions of inauthenticity if the influencer is viewed as overly commercialized.

Al Doghan and Arshad (2023) explored how the content shared by SMIs significantly impacts consumer engagement and purchasing behavior. Informative content fosters trust by offering valuable insights about products, while entertaining content creates emotional connections, thereby increasing engagement. Both types of content contribute to positive attitudes toward sponsored posts and enhance purchase intentions. Ki and Kim (2019) similarly noted that consumers are more inclined to develop positive attitudes toward SMIs who offer visually appealing content, demonstrate expertise, and provide useful information.

Casaló et al. (2018) stress the significance of authenticity in SMI content, arguing that audiences are more likely to engage with and trust SMI content they perceive as genuine rather than overly commercial. Authenticity strengthens the bond between SMIs and their followers, leading to higher levels of engagement and increased likelihood of purchasing the products they promote. On the other hand, Jin and Muqaddam (2019) caution that overly promotional or financially driven content can result in negative consumer reactions, reducing trust and engagement. To address this, SMIs often blend promotional content with personal posts, creating a more balanced and relatable narrative.

Sponsorship disclosures are a crucial element of influencer marketing, informing consumers about the commercial ties between the SMI and the brand. Sesar et al. (2022) found that clear sponsorship disclosures can enhance an influencer's perceived credibility by fostering transparency, which in turn boosts consumer trust in their recommendations. This increased trust positively impacts consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, suggesting that transparency can foster trust rather than skepticism. Similarly, van der Bend et al. (2023) examined the role of sponsorship disclosures in influencer marketing, particularly in TikTok videos targeting adolescents. They found that such disclosures raise awareness of the persuasive nature of influencer marketing, though they may not directly influence brand attitudes or product choices. Musiyiwa and Jacobson (2023) highlighted both algorithmic and non-algorithmic barriers to compliance with sponsorship disclosure regulations, noting that many SMIs fail to fully adhere due to challenges like shadowbanning or the complexity of disclosure tools. SMIs often fear that proper disclosures will negatively impact their visibility and engagement, leading to incomplete or vague disclosures.

Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced the term parasocial interaction (PSI) to describe one-sided relationships between media audiences and personalities. They argued that viewers develop illusions of intimacy with TV personalities, forming pseudo-friendships. Giles (2002) expanded the concept of PSI to digital contexts, demonstrating how audiences engage with media figures in non-reciprocal relationships, sometimes attributing human-like qualities to them. PSI involves a psychological connection in which individuals feel emotionally attached to media personalities, such as social media influencers (SMIs) and celebrities.

SMIs are perceived as more trustworthy and authentic when their content appears personal, such as through vlogs or behind-the-scenes stories (Labrecque, 2014). This perception resembles real-life friendships, enhancing the persuasive impact of product endorsements. PSIs serve as a bridge between an SMI's presence and consumer

behavior, as the emotional connection established through these interactions plays a more significant role than direct promotional efforts. For instance, research indicates that followers with strong PSIs are 30% more likely to purchase recommended products compared to casual viewers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Labrecque, 2014).

Younger audiences, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, are more likely to develop these interactions due to their digital-native socialization patterns (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). The sense of intimacy SMIs build with their followers often leads to stronger emotional bonds. These relationships are characterized by emotional investment, perceived intimacy, and unilateral engagement—followers believe they "know" the SMI, even though the interaction is not reciprocated (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Chung and Cho (2017) similarly found that stronger PSIs between followers and SMIs result in higher levels of trust in endorsements and greater purchase intentions. PSIs—the one-sided relationships audiences form with media figures—are increasingly important in the context of social media, where SMIs frequently share personal aspects of their lives. Breves et al. (2021) found that PSIs significantly boost the perceived credibility of SMIs, leading to more favorable evaluations of sponsored content.

Hoffner and Bond (2022) also explored the role of PSIs in shaping both online and offline behaviors, noting that these relationships help SMIs build deeper emotional connections with their audience. Hwang and Zhang (2018) found that empathy and low self-esteem contribute to stronger PSIs, which subsequently influence electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and consumer purchasing behavior. Leite and Baptista (2021) further demonstrated that SMIs who engage in high levels of self-disclosure strengthen PSIs, improving perceived credibility and trust in their product endorsements. Masuda et al. (2022) found that attributes such as social attractiveness and attitude homophily (the perceived similarity between SMIs and their followers) are crucial in developing strong PSIs, which influence purchasing behavior. Similarly, Su et al. (2021) observed that interpersonal attraction—whether physical, task-oriented, or social—reinforces PSIs and has a direct effect on brand loyalty and purchase intentions. Yuksel and Labrecque (2016) showed that PSIs enhance emotional connections, resulting in greater engagement and long-term brand loyalty.

This study proposes that the perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness of SMIs influence the development of PSIs, which in turn affect purchase intentions. It also posits that stronger purchase intentions ultimately lead to enhanced consumer loyalty. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships between perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, parasocial interactions, purchase intentions, and consumer loyalty.
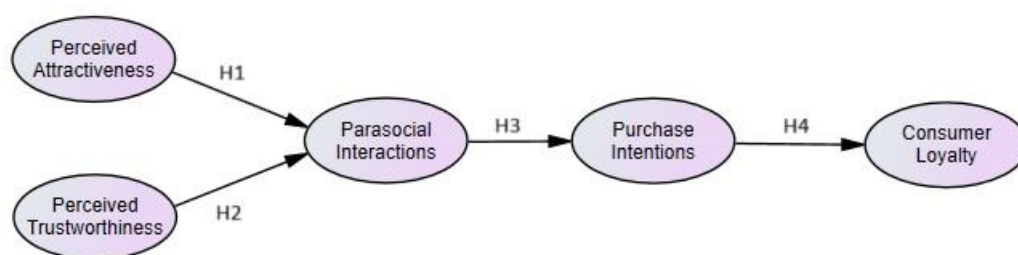


Figure 1. Hypothetical Model of SMI Influence on Purchasing Intentions

Every one-single headed arrow represents a hypothesis, thus.

H1: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the perceived attractiveness of SMIs and PSIs.

H2: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs and PSIs.

H3: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the PSIs and consumers' purchase intentions.

H4: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the consumer purchase intentions and consumer loyalty.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research Design

This research employed a quantitative approach to explore the influence of SMIs on university students' purchasing intentions. The paper utilized an online survey, a suitable method for collecting data from a widespread sample. While probability sampling methods (e.g., random sampling) enhance generalizability, they require comprehensive population lists (e.g., all university students in a country), which are unavailable. Convenience sampling is appropriate for studies aiming to explore relationships between variables (e.g., trustworthiness, parasocial interactions) rather than to generalize findings to an entire population. An online survey and convenience sampling approach are employed to ensure a pragmatic balance between research objectives, resource constraints, and the characteristics of the target population. The survey aimed to assess key factors such as

perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, PSIs, and consumer loyalty, all of which are believed to affect purchasing decisions. A combination of multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and demographic questions was used to gather a comprehensive dataset suitable for various statistical analyses. To test the proposed relationships, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied. CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) was conducted to ensure the constructs' validity and reliability, and path analysis was used to examine the research hypotheses.

### 3.2. Sampling Method

The research focused on university students who actively engage with social media and follow at least one SMI. A convenience sampling method, which is a non-probability technique often used in exploratory studies, was employed for selecting the sample. This method was preferred due to the accessibility of the student demographic and the straightforward distribution of the survey via social media and university channels.

The final sample consisted of 358 participants, enough to achieve statistically significant results while allowing for a margin of error in extrapolating findings to the larger population. The sample was diverse, encompassing students from various academic fields, age ranges, and socio-economic backgrounds, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the impact of SMIs.

### 3.3. Data Collection

Data was collected between March 1, 2023, and May 1, 2024, through an online survey distributed via email, social media platforms, and university communication channels. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section gathered demographic information such as participants' age, gender, academic discipline, and patterns of social media usage. The second section focused on participants' perceptions of social media influencers (SMIs) and their purchasing behaviors.

To ensure the clarity and appropriateness of the measurement instrument, a structured item development process was followed. All constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from established studies. Specifically, perceived attractiveness (6 items) and trustworthiness (4 items) were based on the work of Ohanian (1990) and Schouten (2021), operationalized through Ulkhaq et al. (2016). Parasocial interaction (5 items) integrated the original scale by Auter and Palmgreen (2000) with modifications adapted for digital media contexts by Labrecque (2014). Purchase intention (4 items) and consumer loyalty (5 items) were drawn from Hwang and Zhang (2018) and Kim and Kim (2021), respectively.

To enhance content validity, the survey was reviewed by three academic experts specializing in marketing and media studies. These experts evaluated the clarity, relevance, and contextual alignment of each item with the research objectives and target population. Based on their feedback, minor adjustments were made to wording and item phrasing to ensure precision and conceptual consistency.

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In addition to the main constructs, the survey also included three demographic variables and three indicators of social media usage. Although no pilot test was conducted prior to the main data collection, the use of validated scales from prior research and expert review of the adapted items helped ensure the reliability and appropriateness of the instrument for the study context.
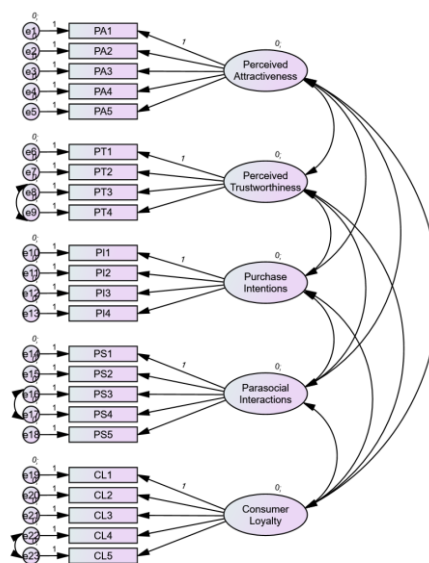


**Figure 2. CFA Model**

**3.4. Data analysis**

The paper utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to investigate the relationships among key constructs, including Perceived Attractiveness, Perceived Trust, Parasocial Interacitons, Purchase Intention, and Consumer Loyalty. SEM was selected for its capacity to analyze intricate relationships among multiple variables simultaneously, making it well-suited for evaluating the proposed model.

CFA was utilized to assess the reliability and validity coefficients of the measurement model. This analysis examined how effectively the observed variables represented the underlying latent constructs. Construct Reliability (CR) was calculated for each construct, with all CR values surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.70, which indicates strong internal consistency. Convergent validity was assessed via Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with values exceeding 0.50.

After completing the CFA, path analysis was conducted within the SEM framework to explore the direct and indirect relationships between the variables. This analysis tested the proposed hypotheses concerning the influence of perceived attractiveness and trust on PSIs, as well as the subsequent effects of PSIs on purchase intention and consumer loyalty. The standardized regression coefficients derived from this analysis offered insights into the strength and direction of these relationships.

The data analysis adhered to a systematic SEM approach, beginning with CFA for reliability and validity assessments, followed by path analysis to investigate the relationships among the variables. The model fit was evaluated using standard goodness-of-fit (GOF) indices, which confirmed the model's suitability for capturing the dynamics between the studied constructs.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Demographic Characteristics

A total of 358 university students participated in the paper, with a gender distribution of 74.3% male (266 participants) and 25.7% female (92 participants) as shown in Table 1. Most participants were aged 21-29, representing 67.9% (243 participants) of the sample, followed by 28.8% (103 participants) aged 18-20, as seen in Table 1. A smaller fraction of the respondents, 2.2% (8 participants), fell into the 30-39 age group, while only 0.8% (3 participants) were 40 years or older.

Regarding educational background, as displayed in Table 1, most participants were pursuing an undergraduate degree (73.8%), while 18.1% held an associate degree, and 2.1% were enrolled in a postgraduate program. The demographic distribution of this sample provides a clear overview of the target population, predominantly composed of young adults engaged in higher education.

**Table 1. Respondent Demographics**

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Valid Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 18-20 | 103 | 28.9 |
| | 21-29 | 243 | 68.1 |
| | 30-39 | 8 | 2.2 |
| | 40+ | 3 | 0.8 |
| | | Statistic | Std. Error |
| Mean | | 1.7303 | .02731 |
| 95% Confidence Interval for Mean | Lower Bound | 1.6766 | |
| | Upper Bound | 1.7840 | |
| Gender | Male | 266 | 74.3 |
| | Female | 92 | 25.7 |
| | Associate degree | 60 | 18.1 |
| Education | Undergraduate | 264 | 79.8 |
| | Postgraduate | 7 | 2.1 |

**4.2. Social Media Usage**

Table 2 provides insight into the daily hours spent on social media platforms. Most respondents, 50.8%, use social media for 2-3 hours/day, indicating that moderate usage is the most common behavior among the sample. A notable portion, 25.7%, reported spending 4-5 hours/day on social media, suggesting that a significant number of participants engage with social media for an extended period. On the lighter end of the spectrum, 13.7% of participants use social media for only 1-2 hours/day. In contrast, 9.8% of respondents reported heavy usage, spending more than 6 hours/day on social media. The findings suggest that social media plays a prominent role in the daily lives of most participants, with the majority dedicating 2-5 hours/day to these platforms each day, while a smaller portion engages in either minimal or heavy usage.

**Table 2. Respondent Social Media Usage Patterns**

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Valid Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social Media Usage | 1-2 hours/day | 49 | 13.7 |
| | 2-3 hours/day | 182 | 50.8 |
| | 4-5 hours/day | 92 | 25.7 |
| | 6+ hours/day | 35 | 9.8 |

Table 3 shows the number of SMIsfollowed by participants. Most respondents, 61.8% (215 people), reported following 1-5 SMIs, indicating that most participants limit their engagement to a small number of SMIs. Following this, 19.0% (66 people) follow 6-10 SMIs, while 8.9% (31 people) reported following 11-15 SMIs. A smaller group, 10.3% (36 people), indicated they follow more than 16 SMIs, which shows that a portion of participants are highly engaged with a larger number of SMIs.

Overall, out of 348 valid responses, the majority follow a limited number of SMIs (1-5), suggesting that participants may be selective in their social media interactions. Meanwhile, a smaller percentage of participants follow more SMIs, reflecting varying levels of engagement with social media personalities. The cumulative percentages show that nearly 90% of participants follow 15 or fewer SMIs. Additionally, there were 10 missing responses (2.8%), resulting in a total of 358 participants surveyed.

**Table 3. Respondent Number of SMIs Followed**

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1-5 | 215 | 60.1 | 61.8 | 61.8 |
| | 6-10 | 66 | 18.4 | 19.0 | 80.7 |
| | 11-15 | 31 | 8.7 | 8.9 | 89.7 |
| | 16+ | 36 | 10.1 | 10.3 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 348 | 97.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | 99 | 10 | 2.8 | | |
| Total | | 358 | 100.0 | | |
| | | Statistic | Std. Error | | |
| Mean | 1.68 | | .054 | | |
| 95% Confidence Interval for Mean | Lower Bound | 1.57 | | | |
| | Upper Bound | 1.78 | | | |

Table 4 shows the social media platforms followed by participants. Instagram is the most popular, with 79.1% (283 participants) using it, indicating its strong influence on the respondents' social media habits. In contrast, Snapchat has low engagement, with only 9.2% (33 participants) following it, while 90.8% (325 participants) do not. This suggests that Snapchat is not as favored, likely due to competition from platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

TikTok is followed by 14.5% (52 participants), while 85.5% (306 participants) do not use it. Despite TikTok's global popularity among younger audiences, its lower adoption in this sample suggests it hasn't achieved the same level of popularity as more traditional platforms. Twitter is followed by 21.8% (78 participants), indicating that while it has some appeal, it is not as widely used as Instagram or YouTube. Twitter's text-based content likely caters to a more niche audience. YouTube is the second most popular platform, with 58.7% (210 participants) using it. Its high usage aligns with global trends favoring video content. In summary, Instagram and YouTube are

the most widely followed platforms, while Snapchat and TikTok have lower engagement. Twitter holds a moderate position with a smaller but notable user base.

**Table 4. Respondent Social Media Platforms Followed**

| | | Frequency | Percentage | Valid Percentage | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Instagram** | | | | | |
| | Yes | 283 | 79.1 | 79.1 | 79.1 |
| Valid | No | 75 | 20.9 | 20.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 358 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |
| **Snapchat** | | | | | |
| | Yes | 33 | 9.2 | 9.2 | 9.2 |
| Valid | No | 325 | 90.8 | 90.8 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 358 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |
| **Tiktok** | | | | | |
| | Yes | 52 | 14.5 | 14.5 | 14.5 |
| Valid | No | 306 | 85.5 | 85.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 358 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |
| **Twitter** | | | | | |
| | Yes | 78 | 21.8 | 21.8 | 21.8 |
| Valid | No | 280 | 78.2 | 78.2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 358 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |
| **Youtube** | | | | | |
| | Yes | 210 | 58.7 | 58.7 | 58.7 |
| Valid | No | 148 | 41.3 | 41.3 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 358 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

## 4.3. Validity and Reliability Testing

To verify the robustness of the measurement model, CFA was performed. The results indicate that all constructs satisfy the necessary thresholds for reliability and validity (Table 5). Construct reliability was evaluated using Construct Reliability (CR), with all constructs surpassing the minimum threshold of 0.70, which signifies strong internal consistency. Additionally, the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) and HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) values were analyzed to assess convergent validity.

Perceived Attractiveness had a CR of 0.894 and an AVE of 0.632, exceeding the minimum AVE threshold of 0.50, confirming strong reliability and convergent validity. The highest within-construct correlation (0.795) further supports the reliability of this factor.

Perceived Trust yielded a CR of 0.734 and an AVE of 0.425. While the CR value is acceptable, the AVE suggests limited convergent validity, indicating that the construct does not fully capture the variance of its indicators. However, significant correlations with perceived attractiveness (0.339) and purchase intention (0.234) highlight its relevance in the model.

Purchase Intention had a CR of 0.746 and an AVE of 0.432, indicating adequate reliability. Despite a lower AVE, strong correlations with perceived attractiveness (0.457) and parasocial effects (0.624) support its central role in the model.

Parasocial Effects demonstrated a CR of 0.839 and an AVE of 0.512, confirming both reliability and validity. Significant correlations with perceived attractiveness (0.615), perceived trust (0.496), and purchase intention (0.624) validate its importance in explaining consumer behavior.

Consumer Loyalty showed a CR of 0.869 and an AVE of 0.573, confirming high reliability and convergent validity. The construct exhibited strong correlations with parasocial effects (0.877), purchase intention (0.607), perceived trust (0.407), and perceived attractiveness (0.550), reinforcing its position as a key outcome variable.

**Table 5. Reliability and Validity Analyses**

| | CR | AVE | Perceived Attractiveness | Perceived Trust | Purchase Intention | Parasocial Effects | Consumer Loyalty |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Attractiveness | 0.894 | 0.632 | **0.795** | | | | |
| Perceived Trust | 0.734 | 0.425 | 0.339*** | **0.652** | | | |
| Purchase Intention | 0.746 | 0.432 | 0.457*** | 0.234*** | **0.657** | | |
| Parasocial Effects | 0.839 | 0.512 | 0.615*** | 0.496*** | 0.624*** | **0.716** | |

| Consumer Loyalty | 0.869 | 0.573 | 0.550*** | 0.407*** | 0.607*** | 0.877*** | **0.757** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

*** p < 0.001, CR: Composite reliability, AVE: Average variance extracted

**Table 6. Confidence Intervals**

|  | CR | AVE | Lower 95% CR | Upper 95% CR | Lower 95% AVE | Upper 95% AVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Attractiveness | 0.894 | 0.632 | 0.847 | 0.928 | 0.530 | 0.723 |
| Perceived Trust | 0.734 | 0.425 | 0.618 | 0.829 | 0.310 | 0.559 |
| Purchase Intention | 0.746 | 0.432 | 0.571 | 0.855 | 0.263 | 0.600 |
| Parasocial Effects | 0.839 | 0.512 | 0.777 | 0.885 | 0.413 | 0.608 |
| Consumer Loyalty | 0.869 | 0.573 | 0.813 | 0.909 | 0.469 | 0.667 |

*** p < 0.001, CR: Composite reliability, AVE: Average variance extracted

The results indicate that most constructs exhibit acceptable to excellent internal consistency based on Composite Reliability (CR) values (Table 6). Specifically, Perceived Attractiveness (CR = 0.894; 95% CI: 0.847–0.928) and Consumer Loyalty (CR = 0.869; 95% CI: 0.813–0.909) demonstrate particularly strong reliability. According to commonly accepted thresholds, CR values above 0.7 are considered acceptable, and values above 0.8 indicate strong reliability.

In terms of convergent validity, assessed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), most constructs meet the recommended threshold of 0.5. Perceived Attractiveness achieves adequate convergent validity (AVE = 0.632; 95% CI: 0.530–0.723), indicating that a substantial proportion of variance is explained by the underlying factor. Similarly, Consumer Loyalty (AVE = 0.573; 95% CI: 0.469–0.667) and Parasocial Effects (AVE = 0.512; 95% CI: 0.413–0.608) also meet or slightly exceed the threshold, though the lower bounds of their confidence intervals approach or fall slightly below 0.5.

Perceived Trust and Purchase Intention show weaker evidence of convergent validity. Although both constructs demonstrate acceptable CR values—0.734 (95% CI: 0.618–0.829) for Perceived Trust and 0.746 (95% CI: 0.571–0.855) for Purchase Intention—their AVE values fall below the recommended cutoff. Perceived Trust has an AVE of 0.425 (95% CI: 0.310–0.559), while Purchase Intention has an AVE of 0.432 (95% CI: 0.263–0.600).

Overall, the findings support the reliability and validity of most measurement constructs used in the study, with particular strength observed in Perceived Attractiveness, Parasocial Effects, and Consumer Loyalty. However, the lower AVE values for Perceived Trust and Purchase Intention highlight the need for further refinement of these measurement items in future research to enhance construct validity.

For additional validity testing, HTMT ratios were calculated, as the AVE criterion is considered overly strict and HTMT is increasingly recognized as a more robust method for assessing discriminant validity (Voorhees et al., 2015; Roemer et al., 2021). Accordingly, HTMT was chosen over AVE in line with recent literature advocating for this approach. Table 7 presents the results of the HTMT analysis, which assesses the discriminant validity of the constructs in the paper. Discriminant validity ensures that the constructs are distinct and not overlapping in their definitions. For adequate distinction, HTMT values should ideally be below 0.85.

The HTMT value between Perceived Attractiveness and Perceived Trust is 0.293, indicating a clear distinction between how participants perceive influencer attractiveness and trustworthiness. Similarly, the values between Perceived Attractiveness and Purchase Intention (0.439) and Perceived Trust and Purchase Intention (0.227) are well below the threshold, confirming that these constructs measure different aspects of consumer behavior.

The relationships between Perceived Attractiveness and Parasocial Effects (0.543) and Perceived Trust and Parasocial Effects (0.413) show that while these factors contribute to PSIs, they remain distinct constructs. Parasocial Effects reflect deeper emotional connections beyond just attractiveness or trust.

The HTMT value between Purchase Intention and Parasocial Effects is 0.512, indicating that PSIs influence purchase intention, but they remain distinct constructs. The highest value, 0.734, is between Consumer Loyalty and Parasocial Effects, suggesting that emotional connections with SMIs contribute to brand loyalty, but loyalty also reflects a long-term commitment beyond parasocial ties.

Lastly, Consumer Loyalty shows a clear distinction between Purchase Intention (0.527) and Perceived Trust (0.357). This reinforces that loyalty reflects a deeper, long-term engagement, separate from immediate purchase intentions and trust.

In conclusion, the HTMT analysis confirms that the constructs—Perceived Attractiveness, Perceived Trust, Parasocial Effects, Purchase Intention, and Consumer Loyalty—are distinct, ensuring the model accurately captures the unique roles of these variables in influencing consumer behavior.

**Table 7. HTMT* Analysis Results**

|  | Perceived Attractiveness | Perceived Attractiveness | Perceived Attractiveness | Perceived Attractiveness | Perceived Attractiveness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceived Attractiveness |  |  |  |  |  |
| Perceived Trust | 0.293 |  |  |  |  |
| Purchase Intention | 0.439 | 0.227 |  |  |  |
| Parasocial Effects | 0.543 | 0.413 | 0.512 |  |  |
| Consumer Loyalty | 0.512 | 0.357 | 0.527 | 0.734 |  |

*HTMT: Heterotrait-Monotrait

In summary, the measurement model demonstrates strong reliability, confirmed through CR values, and robust discriminant validity, validated by HTMT ratios. This confirms the adequacy of the scales for further analysis and supports the theoretical framework of the paper.

### 4.4. Model Fit and Path Analysis

The model's goodness of fit was evaluated using several key indices, as outlined in Table 8. These indices assess how well the proposed structural equation model reflects the observed data, providing a comprehensive view of its adequacy.

The Chi-Square (CMIN) value of 624.921 offers a measure of how closely the theoretical model matches the empirical data. In SEM (Structural Equation Modeling), the CMIN statistic tends to be sensitive to large sample sizes, which often leads to significant results even when the model has an adequate fit. Given the relatively large sample size in this study (n=358), the CMIN value should not be interpreted in isolation, but in conjunction with other fit indices for a more accurate evaluation.

The model's Degrees of Freedom (DF) was 222, reflecting the complexity of the relationships being modeled. Higher DF values suggest a more constrained and parsimonious model, while lower DF values can indicate a model that is potentially overfitted. In this case, the DF value is appropriate given the complexity of the model, which includes multiple constructs and relationships.

One of the most informative indicators, the CMIN/DF ratio, was calculated at 2.815, which falls within the widely accepted range of 1 to 3. This ratio adjusts the CMIN value based on the model's complexity and provides a more interpretable measure of model fit. A CMIN/DF ratio below 3 indicates an excellent fit, suggesting that the model strikes a good balance between complexity and fit, making it a valid representation of the relationships between the constructs.

The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was calculated as 0.907, which surpasses the minimum threshold of 0.90 but falls short of the optimal benchmark of 0.95. The CFI evaluates how well the proposed model fits compared to a null model that presumes no relationships among the variables. A CFI value above 0.90 suggests that the model fits the data adequately, although there is potential for enhancement.

Taken together, these indices indicate that the proposed model demonstrates a strong overall fit. The CMIN/DF ratio confirms an excellent model fit by adjusting for complexity, while the CFI further supports that the model captures most of the variance in the observed data. Although the CFI suggests slight room for improvement, the overall fit is robust. These results provide confidence in the model's ability to explain the relationships between social media SMIs, parasocial effects, purchase intention, and consumer loyalty.

**Table 8. Goodness of Fit (GOF) Values**

| Criterion | Calculated | Threshold | Comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| CMIN | 624.921 | -- | -- |
| DF | 222.000 | -- | -- |
| CMIN/DF | 2.815 | Between 1-3 | Excellent |
| CFI | 0.907 | >0.95 | Acceptable |
| SRMR | 0,067 | <0.08 | Excellent |
| RMSEA | 0,071 | <0.06 | Acceptable |

CMIN: Chi-square, DF: Degrees of freedom, CFI: Comparative Fit Index, SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual, RMSEA: The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

**4.5. Hypothesis Testing**

The standardized regression coefficients from the path analysis, presented in Table 9, confirm that all four hypotheses were supported by the data, with highly significant relationships observed across the proposed paths.

- *H1: Perceived Attractiveness → Parasocial Effects:* The relationship between perceived attractiveness and parasocial effects was statistically significant (standardized beta ($\beta$) = 0.538; $p < 0.001$), which suggests that the perceived attractiveness of SMIs enhances the PSIs developed by consumers.

- *H2: Perceived Trust → Parasocial Effects:* The standardized beta coefficient for perceived trust on parasocial effects was statistically significant (standardized beta ($\beta$) = 0.299; $p < 0.001$). While this effect is lower than that of perceived attractiveness, it highlights the role of trust in fostering PSIs between SMIs and their followers.

- *H3: Parasocial Effects → Purchase Intention:* Parasocial effects were found to have a statistically significant influence on purchase intention (standardized beta ($\beta$) = 0.923; $p < 0.001$), suggesting that PSIs significantly drive consumers' intention to purchase the recommendations of social media SMIs.

- *H4: Purchase Intention → Consumer Loyalty:* There is statistically significant relationship between the purchase intention and consumer loyalty (standardized beta ($\beta$) = 0.883; $p < 0.001$). This result highlights the strong influence of purchase intentions on long-term consumer loyalty, demonstrating that consumers who intend to purchase based on influencer recommendations are more likely to become loyal to the brand.

**Table 9. Standardized Regression Coefficients**

| Predictor | Outcome | Standardized Beta |
|---|---|---|
| Perceived Attractiveness | Parasocial Effects | 0.538 *** |
| Perceived Trust | Parasocial Effects | 0.299 *** |
| Parasocial Effects | Purchase Intention | 0.923 *** |
| Purchase Intention | Consumer Loyalty | 0.883 *** |

*** $p < 0.001$

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping consumer behavior, particularly among university students. This research expands on existing literature by examining how key influencer characteristics—perceived attractiveness and perceived trust—affect the development of parasocial interactions (PSIs) and their subsequent impact on purchase intention and consumer loyalty.

One of the primary findings is the strong influence of perceived attractiveness on PSIs. The data suggests that SMIs who are perceived as physically appealing or have a captivating online persona are more likely to establish stronger emotional bonds with their audience. This aligns with previous studies indicating that attractiveness enhances an influencer's ability to engage followers and build rapport (Yuan & Lou, 2020). In this case, attractiveness functions as a key driver of parasocial relationships, where consumers feel a sense of familiarity and emotional connection with the influencer, even in the absence of direct interaction.

In addition to attractiveness, perceived trust emerged as another critical factor influencing PSIs (Meng et al., 2024). Although trust did not exert as strong an effect as attractiveness, it played a pivotal role in determining how effectively SMIs build relationships with their followers. Trustworthiness enhances an influencer's credibility, making consumers more receptive to their recommendations. This finding aligns with previous literature positioning trust as a fundamental component of successful influencer marketing, particularly in driving consumer engagement and purchase decisions (Yuan & Lou, 2020).

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for businesses and marketers seeking to optimize their partnerships with social media influencers (SMIs). Understanding the factors that drive consumer trust, engagement, and purchasing decisions allows brands to develop more effective influencer marketing strategies. In particular, the study underscores the importance of leveraging micro-influencers, aligning influencer partnerships with brand values, fostering long-term collaborations, and tailoring content strategies to specific social media platforms.

One of the most significant takeaways from this research is the potential of micro-SMIs to generate more meaningful engagement than their macro-influencer counterparts. While influencers with massive followings may reach a wider audience, they often experience lower engagement rates and diminished trust due to perceived commercialization. Micro-SMIs, on the other hand, cultivate closer relationships with their followers, fostering stronger parasocial interactions (PSIs) that make their recommendations feel more authentic and credible. For

brands looking to establish trust and long-term loyalty, collaborating with micro-influencers can be a more effective strategy than prioritizing sheer reach.

Beyond follower count, the alignment between an influencer's persona and a brand's core values plays a crucial role in the success of marketing campaigns. Consumers are increasingly skeptical of influencer endorsements that feel disconnected from an influencer's usual content or personal beliefs. Partnering with SMIs who genuinely reflect a brand's mission, aesthetic, and target audience enhances the credibility of the message and strengthens consumer trust. When selecting influencers, brands should prioritize those who naturally incorporate their products into their lifestyle rather than those who simply fit a predefined mold of attractiveness or popularity.

Moreover, this study highlights the importance of long-term collaborations over one-time partnerships. While short-term influencer promotions may generate immediate visibility and sales spikes, they often fail to create sustained brand loyalty. Consumers develop trust and affinity for a brand when they see consistent engagement from an influencer they admire. Long-term collaborations allow influencers to integrate the brand into their daily lives in an organic way, reinforcing credibility and fostering deeper emotional connections with their audience. Brands that invest in extended partnerships with SMIs are more likely to see a lasting impact on consumer purchasing behavior and brand loyalty.

Another critical implication is the need for transparency and authenticity in influencer content. Trust is a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing, and brands must ensure that their collaborations encourage honesty rather than overly promotional messaging. Consumers respond more positively to influencers who provide genuine, experience-based reviews rather than scripted endorsements. Encouraging influencers to share behind-the-scenes content, discuss both pros and cons of a product, and clearly disclose sponsorships enhances their perceived credibility. In contrast, deceptive or overly polished endorsements can erode trust and damage both the influencer's reputation and the brand's credibility.

Finally, brands must recognize that different social media platforms amplify influencer characteristics in distinct ways. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which emphasize short-form visual content, make influencer attractiveness a dominant factor in engagement. By contrast, platforms such as YouTube and Twitter prioritize informational and conversational content, where trust and expertise become more influential. Marketers should tailor their influencer strategies based on these platform-specific dynamics. For visually driven platforms, campaigns should focus on compelling imagery and aesthetics, while long-form platforms should prioritize in-depth storytelling, expert insights, and interactive engagement.

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is not solely determined by an influencer's popularity but by the depth of their connection with their audience. Brands that strategically collaborate with micro-SMIs, prioritize value alignment, invest in long-term partnerships, promote transparency, and adapt strategies to platform-specific dynamics are more likely to cultivate lasting consumer trust and loyalty. As social media continues to evolve, these insights provide a roadmap for businesses looking to maximize the impact of their influencer marketing efforts.

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite offering valuable insights into the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping consumer behavior, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. A more detailed analysis of these limitations is essential to contextualize the findings and guide future research.

One of the primary limitations of this study is its reliance on a sample predominantly composed of university students. While younger individuals represent a significant segment of social media users and are highly engaged with influencer content, their consumer behavior, digital literacy, and susceptibility to influencer marketing may differ from older demographics. For instance, older consumers may place greater emphasis on an influencer's expertise and credibility rather than attractiveness, which was found to be a strong driver of parasocial interactions (PSIs) in this study. Additionally, socioeconomic factors, employment status, and life experiences may shape the way different age groups engage with influencer marketing. To improve the generalizability of future research, a more diverse sample—including middle-aged and older consumers—should be considered. Exploring whether the influence of attractiveness and trust varies across different age groups could provide a more nuanced understanding of SMI effectiveness. Moreover, demographic factors such as gender, cultural background, and prior exposure to influencer marketing should be accounted for, as they may moderate the effects observed in this study.

A significant methodological limitation of this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which introduces several potential biases. Future research could address these issues by incorporating more objective behavioral measures, such as tracking actual engagement with influencer content (e.g., likes, comments, shares), monitoring purchasing behavior through sales data linked to influencer campaigns, or using experimental designs where exposure to influencer content is controlled. Additionally, physiological measures such as eye tracking or neural imaging could be employed to examine subconscious responses to influencer marketing.

While this study focused on perceived attractiveness and trust as key influencer characteristics, there are several other factors that may influence PSIs and purchase behavior that were not accounted for. Future research should expand the model to include these additional influencer traits and examine how they interact with attractiveness and trust in driving consumer behavior.

This study did not differentiate between social media platforms, which may play a significant role in moderating the effects of influencer characteristics on consumer behavior. Different platforms emphasize distinct content formats and user engagement styles, which can influence how attractiveness, trust, and PSIs function. Future studies should investigate platform-specific effects by analyzing how influencer characteristics operate across different social media channels. This could help brands tailor their influencer marketing strategies based on the strengths of each platform.

This study was conducted within a specific cultural context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Cross-cultural research could explore how influencer effectiveness varies across different countries and social contexts. Additionally, examining regional preferences for different influencer traits could help brands refine their marketing strategies for global audiences.

To address these limitations, future studies should include a more diverse participant pool across age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural contexts to assess the broader applicability of findings. Future studies should use use behavioral and experimental methods such as engagement metrics, purchase tracking, or controlled experiments. Additional influencer traits should be investigated to explore other characteristics like expertise, relatability, and content style to refine our understanding of influencer effectiveness. Analyze how social media platforms should be Differentiated to analyze platform-specific influences that mediates the impact of attractiveness and trust on PSIs and consumer behavior. Comparative studies shold be conducted to explore cross-cultural differences to understand how cultural factors shape influencer marketing outcomes in different regions.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study provides valuable insights into the growing influence of SMIs on consumer behavior, particularly among younger demographics like university students. By examining key characteristics such as perceived attractiveness and perceived trust, the research highlights the significant role these factors play in shaping PSIs and, in turn, driving purchase intentions and consumer loyalty.

The findings emphasize that SMIs are more than mere promotional tools; they are powerful intermediaries capable of fostering deep emotional connections with their followers. These PSIs, built on attractiveness and trust, form the foundation of effective SMI marketing strategies. SMIs who can cultivate trust and maintain an appealing presence are more likely to encourage consumers to engage with the products and brands they promote.

The paper also underlines the dual impact of SMI marketing on both short-term and long-term consumer outcomes. While SMIs can drive immediate purchase intentions, they also contribute to building enduring consumer loyalty by nurturing emotional bonds with their followers. This makes SMI marketing not only a tool for driving sales but also a strategic approach for sustaining brand engagement over time.

In summary, this research highlights the importance of carefully selecting SMIs based on their ability to generate emotional rapport and credibility with their audience. These factors significantly enhance the success of influencer-driven campaigns, particularly in engaging younger, tech-savvy consumers. As social media continues to play a pivotal role in the marketing landscape, brands that leverage SMIs effectively can expect not only increased consumer engagement but also long-term loyalty to their products and services.

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