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THE INFLUENCE OF PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY AND PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON CONSUMER TRUST IN INFLUENCER-ENDORSED BRAND MESSAGES

Joy de los Reyes

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1514-7860>

E-mail: jdelosre@ramapo.edu

Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, United States

Abstract

Consumer trust in brand messages is a trending and pertinent topic in social media marketing, particularly in a time when influencers are commanding more of the messaging space. This research project aims to discover the psychological factors that make consumers trust a brand's message when it's delivered by a social media influencer. The primary goal is to determine if consumer trust is built more on the influencer's perceived credibility (are they honest and an expert?) or the strength of the consumer's personal connection with them—known as a "parasocial relationship," or the feeling that the influencer is a friend. The study involved a quantitative survey to assess consumer trust in the brand endorsed by a select influencer. Their perception of that influencer's credibility, the strength of their parasocial bond, and their resulting trust in the brand's sponsored message was studied. By collecting and analyzing this quantitative data, the researcher seeks to understand the specific path—whether through expertise or perceived friendship—that converts a casual follower into a trusting consumer, thereby helping brands create more effective and genuine social media marketing campaigns.

Key Words: Parasocial Relationships, Perceived Influencer Credibility, Consumer Trust, Social Media Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Gap in Literature

The purpose of this study is to understand the psychological means that drive consumer trust in influencer-endorsed brand messages. Social media influencers have become opinion leaders, representing a brand as ambassadors and experts (Yerasani et al., 2019). The goal of influencers is to create a strong bond with the audience through social networks (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). The focus of the research is on whether trust is more strongly associated with the influencer's perceived credibility or by the emotional bond formed between consumer and influencer. The perceived credibility is defined by the influencer's honesty and expertise (Kim & Song, 2020). The parasocial bond is the emotional connection made between the consumer and influencer (Hoffner, 2022). By identifying which factor plays a more dominant role in fostering trust, the research aims to offer practical insights for brands looking to optimize influencer marketing strategies for authenticity and effectiveness.

Credibility plays a significant role in consumer behavior and the formation of trust in marketing. There is a literature gap in consumer trust and the perceived credibility of the influencer as compared to the parasocial bond created between influencer and consumer. Many studies explore influencer marketing on a macro level, with focus on social media metrics, brand awareness and purchase intentions. Pan (2024) examined several studies in a meta-analysis that showcased much of the literature focuses on behavioral and marketing outcomes, such as engagement, purchase intention, and brand awareness. For example, Zaidi (2024) finds influencer attributes drive engagement and purchase intention, and Larasati et al. (2022) examine credibility in relation to brand awareness and purchase intention. Although these studies offer significant contributions, they use influencer credibility and consumer trust as precursors to awareness and purchasing outcomes.

Few studies have honed in on how credibility and/or parasocial relationship translates into trust in brand messages on social media networks. The limited focus on trust in branded communications from marketing influencers offers a distinct gap in the literature. Given the increased usage and dependency on social media networks for information and engagement, there is a need to explore contemporary dynamics, such as authenticity, parasocial relationships, and the blurred boundaries between personal and sponsored content in digital environments (Wojtara, 2023). These limitations suggest a need for deeper understanding of various dimensions of influencer perceived expertise and consumer bonds in the trusting brand messaging. Addressing this gap can offer valuable theoretical insights and practical implications for brands seeking to build more trustworthy influencer partnerships in an increasingly skeptical online landscape. The research aims to provide practical insights for marketing influencers and brands in their communications to consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Credibility and Consumer Trust

When looking at consumer trust in social media marketing, influencer credibility is widely recognized as a key factor. As studied by Ohanian (1990) in his Source Credibility Model, perceived influencer credibility is typically defined by two dimensions: expertise (the influencer's perceived knowledge) and trustworthiness (the influencer's perceived honesty and integrity). Many recent studies have continued to validate his model. It anchors the discussion in a well-established theoretical framework that has guided decades of research on persuasion and endorsement. The emphasis on *expertise* and *trustworthiness* underscores how these dimensions remain central to understanding why audiences accept or reject influencer-endorsed messages. One recent study conducted by Filieri, Acikgoz, Li and Alguezaui (2023) determined that influencers with high credibility play a major role in shifting consumer attitudes and purchasing behavior. Credibility not only boosts message believability, but also strengthens the influencer's persuasive power, particularly when there is high skepticism around sponsored content, such as on social media platforms.

Parasocial Relationships and Consumer Trust

In addition to influencer credibility, parasocial relationships (PSRs) have been widely studied to determine the large role played in establishing consumer trust. PSRs refer to the one-sided psychological attachments that followers develop with media figures, where the influencer is perceived as personally known or familiar despite no real mutual interaction (Su, Wu, Chang, & Hong, 2021). The literature demonstrates that when followers feel a sense of closeness or friendship toward an influencer, this emotional connection plays a large role in influencing the purchase decisions. Recent studies by Yan and Takahashi (2025) have also found that parasocial relationship trust also strengthens brand referrals. PSRs act as a powerful trust-building mechanism in influencer marketing, suggesting that the strength of the consumer–influencer relationship can determine the perceived authenticity and credibility of brand communications. Understanding this dynamic provides important insight into how emotional connections on social media translate into consumer trust and brand acceptance.

Comparative Influence of Credibility vs. Parasocial Bonds

While both credibility and PSRs contribute to consumer trust, various literature explore which factor plays a stronger role. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that PSRs often have a more substantial impact on trust and purchase intention than perceived expertise, especially among younger consumers who prioritize emotional connection. However, other studies have shown the opposite is true. These findings indicate inconclusive outcomes, whereby few studies have directly compared the relative strength of these constructs using quantitative methods. Consequently, this research will analyze a triangulation of perceived credibility, parasocial connection, and consumer trust in brand messages from influencers.

Most existing studies rely on qualitative approaches or examine these constructs in isolation. This study addresses the literature gap by utilizing a quantitative framework to evaluate how these psychological mechanisms interact to shape trust in brand messages. The findings aim to inform effective influencer marketing strategies in impacting consumer behavior.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Consumers increasingly rely on social media influencers for product recommendations, but the psychological mechanisms that drive trust in these endorsements remain unclear. Specifically, it is unknown whether trust is more strongly influenced by the influencer’s perceived credibility or by the strength of the parasocial relationship between the consumer and the influencer.

The research aims to examine the effect of perceived influencer credibility, such as trustworthiness and expertise, on consumer trust in brand messages, as well as assess the impact of parasocial relationships, and determine which factor has a stronger influence on trust.

The research questions are as follows:

- How does perceived credibility of a social media influencer affect consumer trust in a brand’s message?
- How does the strength of a parasocial relationship with an influencer affect consumer trust?
- Which factor, credibility or parasocial relationship, has a greater impact on trust in influencer-endorsed brand messages?

HYPOTHESES

- **H1:** Higher perceived credibility of an influencer leads to greater consumer trust in the brand message.
- **H2:** Stronger parasocial relationships with an influencer lead to greater consumer trust in the brand message.
- **H3:** Parasocial relationships have a stronger effect on consumer trust than perceived credibility.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study was conducted to study the relationships and effectiveness of perceived influencer credibility and parasocial relationships on consumer trust in brand messages. Primary data was collected to address the research questions presented in the study. An online survey of social media users who follow influencers was performed with a sample size of sixty. The survey includes screening questions to ensure participants follow at least one influencer and have encountered sponsored content. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with informed consent obtained prior to survey completion. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Figure I below shows the diagram of the model, with the independent variables being perceived credibility and parasocial relationship and the dependent variable being consumer trust. Perceived credibility is known as expertise and trustworthiness, whereas a parasocial relationship indicates emotional closeness and a perceived friendship. The dependent variable, consumer trust, indicates believability, reliability, and confidence in a brand message.

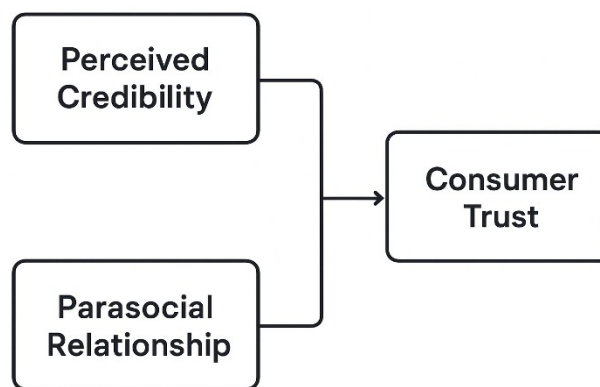


Figure I. Theoretical Model

Based on the theoretical framework of past literature, perceived influencer credibility and parasocial relationships play a role in consumer behavior. The outcome variable for this study is nominal selected from the survey relating to whether the credibility and parasocial relationship of the influencer and follower impact the consumer's trust in brand messages. A multiple regression analysis was performed to test the strength and direction of the relationships. The research also includes descriptive statistics to analyze participant demographics, such as gender, age, and social media usage patterns among the sample.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The results of the survey were analyzed by both the sample's descriptive statistics for each of the independent variables as well as the multiple regression analysis for the inferential statistics. Based on the results, the most represented group in the study were females (60.7%) compared to males (39.3%), suggesting women are more engaged with influencers in this data set. Meanwhile, the most represented age group was 21-24 (46.6%), followed by 18-20 (31%), and then 35+ (19%). The other age groups were each less than 2%. Figure II and Figure III represent the demographics of the sample size.

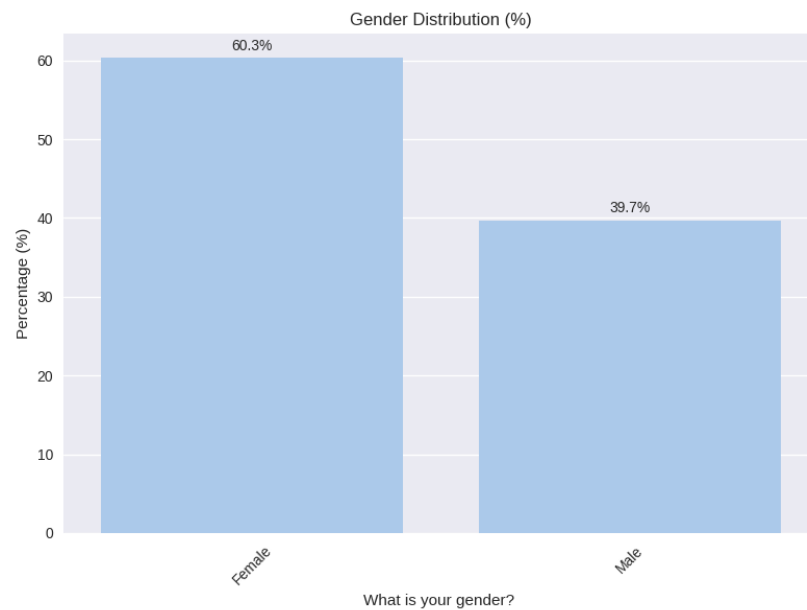


Figure II. Gender Distribution

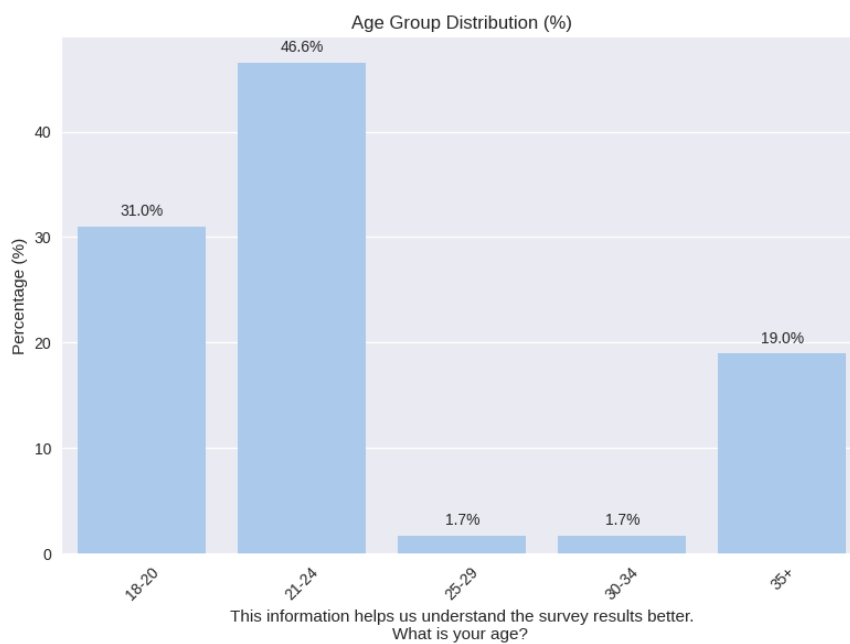


Figure III. Age Group Distribution

When analyzing the social media metrics, the study focused on the primary social media networks used as well as the average amount of time spent on social media per day. The survey results indicated that the top two primary social media networks commonly visited were Instagram and TikTok, followed by YouTube, whereas Facebook and X were not as prevalent. Additionally, most respondents spend 1–3 hours or 3–5 hours daily on social media. A smaller portion reports using it for less than 1 hour or more than 5 hours. Below are Figures IV and V which visually demonstrate the results of the primary social media platform followed and hours spent on social media, respectively.

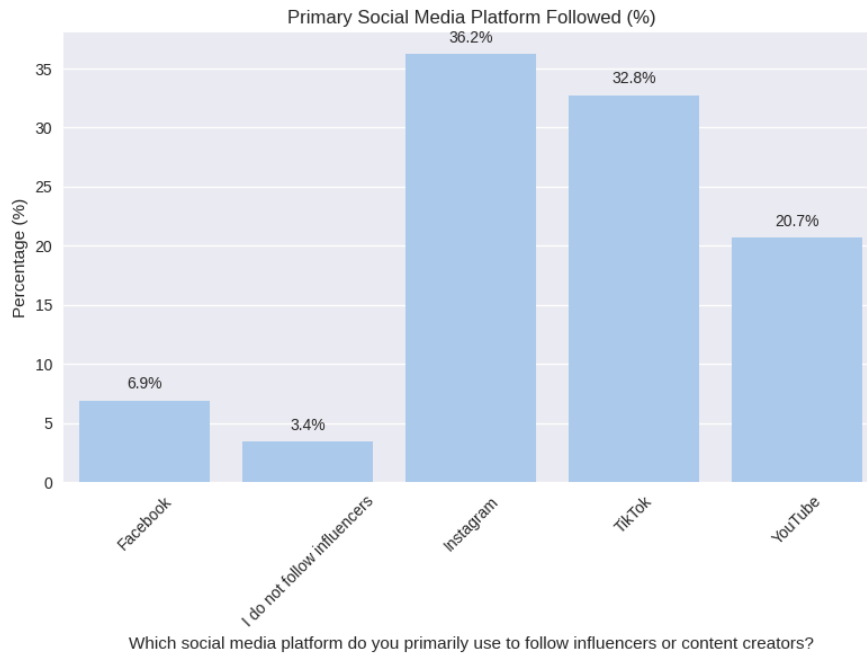


Figure IV. Primary Social Media Platform Followed

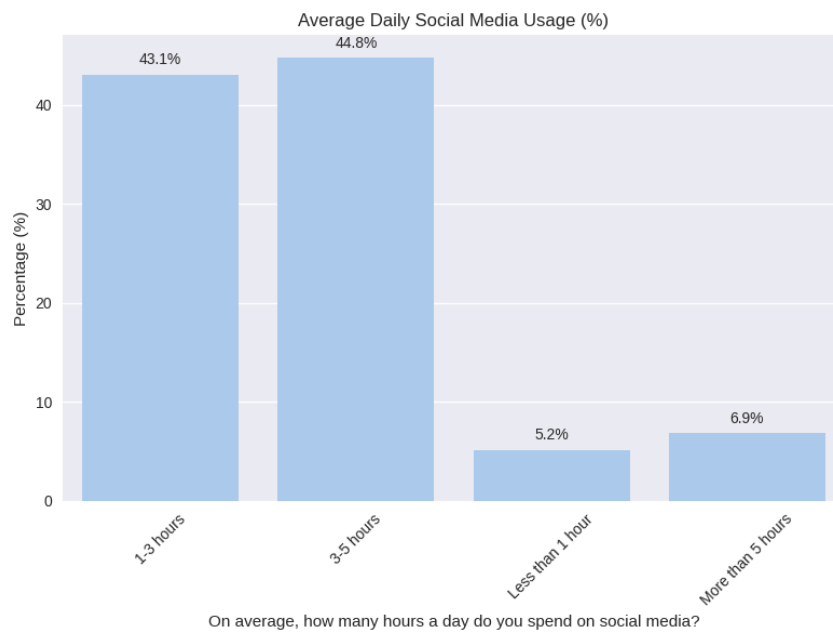


Figure V. Average Daily Social Media Usage

Inferential Statistics

In analyzing the relationships, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, whereby there was a positive correlation between parasocial relationship and consumer trust. Hence, a stronger emotional

connection with influencers tends to increase consumer trust. On the other hand, perceived influencer credibility displays a weaker or less consistent relationship, suggesting credibility alone may not drive trust as strongly as emotional bonds. Based on the literature, these findings are as expected. However, this study also looked at which criteria could be more influential as well as categorizing based on the various descriptive statistics.

In terms of the research questions, there is a weaker positive correlation between perceived influencer credibility and consumer trust. Credibility is not statistically significant, even though it slightly relates to trust. The correlation between parasocial strength and consumer trust is a much stronger positive relationship, which means that the emotional connection with influencers significantly boosts trust. The bar chart in Figure VI below illustrates that parasocial bonds are a much stronger predictor of trust than credibility, with parasocial strength beta coefficient being 0.435 and perceived credibility being 0.107.



Figure VI. Perceived Credibility and Parasocial Strength vs Consumer Trust

Further analysis was conducted to evaluate the data based on social media platform, age, and gender. The platform results elicit that Instagram and Facebook users show the strongest influence of parasocial relationships on trust, whereas YouTube users rate influencers as highly credible, but this doesn't translate as strongly into trust. Meanwhile, TikTok users show moderate effects for both predictors, with parasocial bonds still being at the forefront of consumer trust. The age subgroup assessment shows that ages 18-20 and 21-24 have the highest parasocial coefficients, which indicates that stronger emotional connections drive trust over credibility in this subset. However, the age group of 35+ demonstrates a more balanced or even slightly stronger results for credibility, despite parasocial still being dominant. In assessing gender variability, the study indicates that females have a higher parasocial influence on brand trustworthiness as compared to males, who tended to find credibility to impact their trust. Despite males rating credibility higher than females, parasocial relationships still play a larger role in predicting trust of brand messages through influencer marketing. Figure VII below shows the standardized coefficients of perceived credibility by subgroups. Meanwhile, Figure VIII below demonstrates the parasocial relationship by subgroup, as explained above.

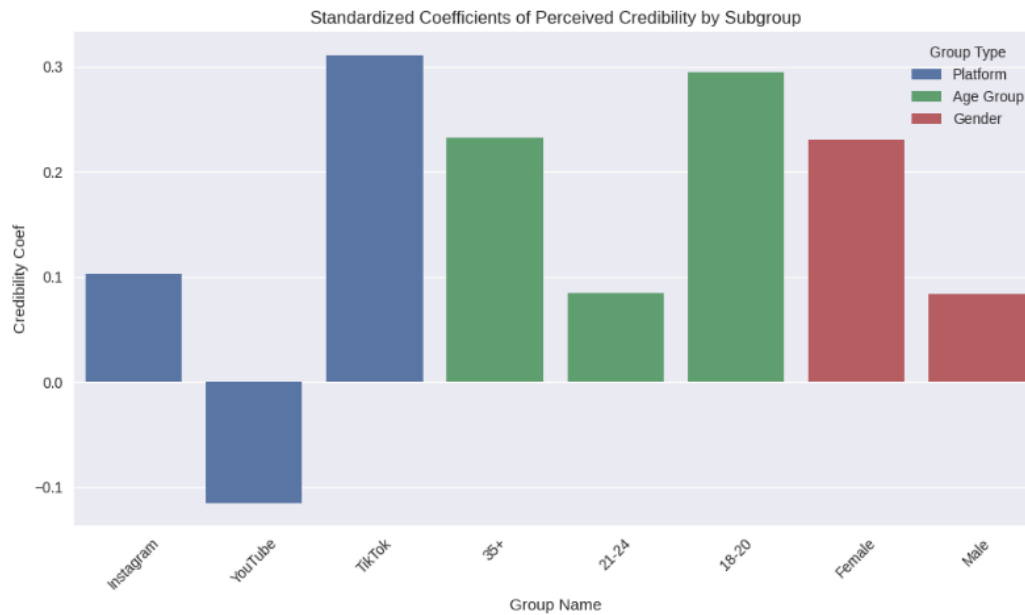


Figure VII. Perceived Credibility by Subgroup

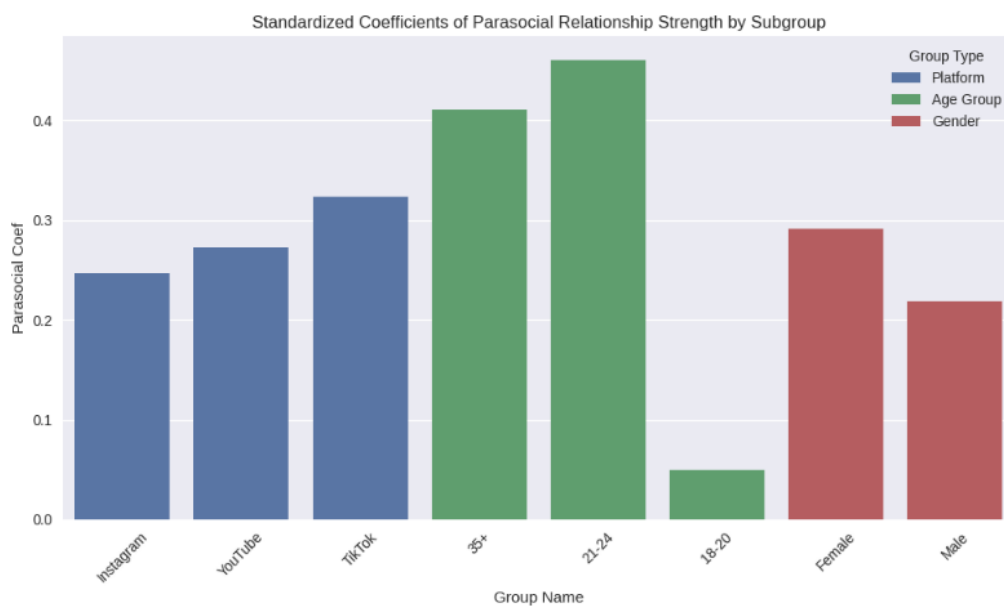


Figure VIII. Parasocial Relationship Strength by Subgroup

Overall, the data supports the hypotheses that greater parasocial bond leads to greater consumer confidence as well as parasocial relationship has a stronger impact on trust than influencer perceived credibility. While greater credibility favors an increase in trust, credibility as an independent variable is not statistically significant in this study.

Practical Implications

The findings of this research offer actionable insights for marketers, influencers, and marketing communication professionals, as the influencer landscape continues to evolve. The results primarily reveal the importance of crafting brand sponsored content that reinforces relationship cues. Personal narratives, behind-the-scenes glimpses, and emotionally formatted content are more likely to support parasocial bonds, which in turn foster consumer trust. This suggests that authenticity in influencer tone and structure may be more persuasive than a polished and professional communication online, particularly because the social media environment thrives on emotional engagement driving message credibility.

Additionally, emerging research in neuroaesthetics also elicits the role of subtle sensory cues, such as eye contact, ambient sound, or expressive facial gestures, in deepening emotional connections. Brand marketers and influencers can leverage these aesthetic prompts to boost parasocial connection. This not only enhances the perceived sincerity of the brand endorsement, but also increases the consumer trust in the messaging. Brands that can integrate these neuroaesthetic cues into content design may create an innovative path to trust-building beyond traditional expertise-based approaches.

Lastly, brand communications in the social world are becoming increasingly decentralized, whereby parasocial capital may become a key factor in brand communication. In these modern environments, trust is less anchored in platform authority and more in emotional equity influencers carry across digital spaces. Brands entering these emerging contexts should prioritize influencers who demonstrate sustained relational engagement, as this emotional continuity is critical for consumer trust in less regulated, creator-own market conditions.

Limitations

While the data is encouraging, there are also limitations to the study, such as platform-specific bias, self-reporting and social desirability biases, and cross-sectional design constraints. First, there may have been platform-specific bias, since the sample disproportionately comprised mostly of TikTok and Instagram users. These platforms may have tendencies towards certain types of users, parasocial relationships, or degrees of influences may vary. This may have limited the ability to generalize the findings to platforms that consist of different content formats or engagement norms, such as LinkedIn or YouTube. Future research should aim for more balanced platform representation to assess whether or not parasocial dynamics vary across media environments.

Meanwhile, all variables were assessed through a self-reported survey, which may contribute to social desirability bias. Participants may have overstated or understated their trust or emotional connection due to perceived expectations or responder error. This could have led to issues of reliability and validity. Behavioral data or an experimental design could have strengthened the validity of the research.

Finally, the study had a cross-sectional design, which captured connections at a single point in time as opposed to continuously. This makes it difficult to infer causality. While parasocial relationships were found to be a stronger predictor of consumer trust than perceived credibility, longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to determine whether these relationships evolve over time or directly influence consumer behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on influencer marketing by demonstrating that parasocial relationships are more influential in earning consumer trust in brand message than perceived credibility. Although the data suggests that expertise and knowledge remain important attributes, they do not significantly predict trust in brand messages as compared to the emotional bonds followers form with influencers. Thus, informational authority is less important than relational engagement when it comes to trust on social platforms and influencer-endorsed content.

The implications of this study are particularly relevant in today's decentralized media and marketing landscape. As influencer marketing continues to grow, brands must recognize the strategic value of parasocial capital and consumer desire for authenticity. Future research should explore how

these dynamics shift across content formats, cultural context, and Artificial Intelligence innovations. This study offers both theoretical insight and practical guidance for marketers aiming to build trust in the online community ecosystem.

Research ethics statement

This article is the author's own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.

Author contribution statement

Joy de los Reyes wrote all sections of the article.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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