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Influencer Credibility, Parasocial Relationships, and Product Involvement in Purchase Intentions

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Abstract

The increasing influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer purchase intentions has become a crucial topic in marketing research, particularly in understanding the mechanisms that drive this effect. This study examines how SMI credibility—defined by trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—affects consumer purchase intentions through the mediating role of parasocial relationships (PSRs) and the moderating role of product involvement. A survey of 205 Thai social media users was conducted, and data were analyzed with Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that SMI credibility positively impacts purchase intentions and strengthens PSRs, which partially mediate this relationship. Moreover, the moderating role of product involvement uncovers a conditional mediation effect: PSRs have a stronger influence on purchase intentions for low-involvement products, where emotional appeals are more effective than rational evaluations. In contrast, for high-involvement products, consumers prioritize cognitive processing and influencer expertise, weakening the impact of PSRs. This research enhances influencer marketing literature by incorporating emotional and cognitive pathways within a mediated-moderated framework. Practically, it highlights the importance of aligning influencer strategies with product involvement, recommending emotionally engaging influencers for low-involvement products and credibility-driven influencers for high-involvement products to maximize marketing effectiveness.

Keywords:

Social Media Influencers' Credibility;

Parasocial Relationships;

Product Involvement;

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1- Introduction

In the digital era, social media has revolutionized brand communication with their audiences. The emergence of social media influencers (SMIs) has become crucial in influencing consumer opinions, preferences, and purchasing decisions. These influencers have amassed large followers on social media platforms and exert substantial influence over their followers through personal, relatable, and credible content. Influencers have emerged as effective channels for brand communication and consumer engagement, often more so than traditional advertising [1, 2]. The credibility of social media influencers is a multifaceted construct that significantly impacts their effectiveness in marketing and consumer behavior. Prior research identifies key dimensions of influencer credibility, including trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, which are critical determinants of their impact on consumer behavior [3, 4]. Credible influencers are more likely to inspire trust, encouraging consumers to consider and act on their recommendations. Research suggests credibility influences consumer attitudes and intentions, particularly when an influencer's endorsement is sincere and aligned with their perceived knowledge and experience [5, 6]. However, the effectiveness of influencer credibility in influencing purchase intentions is not solely dependent on these qualities; it also interacts with other psychological factors that affect how consumers respond to influencer content.

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A significant issue is the notion of parasocial relationships (PSRs), which are one-sided, pseudo-social relationships that followers establish with influencers. These PSRs create an illusion of friendship and familiarity, making consumers feel emotionally attached to influencers, even though these relationships are not reciprocated [7]. This emotional attachment, built over time through consistent engagement and relatable content, strengthens the persuasive power of the influencer. Previous studies have shown that PSRs can enhance trust, loyalty, and the perceived authenticity of the influencer, making consumers more receptive to their endorsements [8, 9]. Consequently, PSRs can mediate the relationship between SMI credibility and consumer purchase intentions, since followers who perceive a bond with an influencer are more inclined to trust and act upon their endorsements. In addition, product involvement, defined as the extent of personal relevance or significance a customer assigns to a product, significantly influences consumer reactions to influencer marketing. Product involvement influences how consumers process information and make purchase decisions. Consumers will likely engage in extensive information processing for high-involvement products, focusing on rational evaluation of product attributes and credibility cues. In contrast, low-involvement products often elicit more emotional, peripheral processing, where consumers rely on affective cues, such as the perceived relationship with the influencer, rather than detailed product evaluation [10]. Consequently, product involvement may moderate the effect of PSRs on purchase intentions, with emotional connections being stronger for low-involvement products, where rational scrutiny is less prominent [11]. This suggests that PSRs will substantially influence consumer purchase intentions for low-involvement products, as consumers are more likely to be swayed by emotional appeals and connections with the influencer.

While prior research has extensively examined the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping consumer behavior, few studies have systematically analyzed the interplay between influencer credibility, parasocial relationships (PSRs), and product involvement in influencing purchase intentions. Most existing studies have focused either on the direct impact of influencer credibility on consumer behavior—primarily through trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise [3, 5, 6]—or the emotional connection between influencers and followers via PSRs [8, 9]. However, limited empirical research explores how these two mechanisms interact and whether their effects vary depending on the level of product involvement. Some studies suggest that emotional factors play a more significant role in low-involvement purchases [10], while others highlight that expertise is crucial for high-involvement decisions [11]. Yet, few have examined these relationships within a single, comprehensive framework. This study aims to address this gap by investigating (1) the impact of SMI credibility on consumer purchase intentions, (2) the mediating role of PSRs in this relationship, and (3) the moderating effect of product involvement on the mediated relationship. This study offers new empirical insights into how influencer marketing effectiveness varies based on product involvement. The findings contribute to influencer marketing research by showing how emotional and rational mechanisms work differently for low- and high-involvement products. The study also provides practical guidance for marketers.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 examines the related literature and formulates the research hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the methodology, detailing data collection procedures and measurement scales. Section 4 presents the hypothesis testing results using PLS-SEM analysis. Section 5 interprets the findings and their implications, while Section 6 concludes with a discussion on study limitations and directions for future research.

2- Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

The emergence of social media influencers (SMIs) as a pivotal element in consumer marketing has heightened interest in comprehending how influencers affect customer behavior. Building on theories related to social influence, credibility, and emotional connection, this study investigates the influence of SMI credibility on consumer purchase intentions, emphasizing the mediating role of parasocial relationships (PSRs) and the moderating effect of product involvement. This section provides an in-depth review of the key constructs and hypotheses underpinning this research.

2-1-SMI Credibility, Parasocial Relationships, and Purchase Intention

SMI credibility is an essential factor in determining the effectiveness of influencers in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors [12-14]. Credibility pertains to the influencer's perceived reliability, expertise, and appeal, which establish the basis for consumer trust and acceptance of the influencer's communications [3, 5]. In the area of social media, influencers regarded as credible are more inclined to foster favorable attitudes and affect consumer purchase intentions, as followers consider them reliable sources of information [15]. Prior studies suggest that customers are more likely to respond to endorsements from influencers that exhibit a blend of expertise, integrity, and attractiveness. Influencers who project credibility encourage consumers to perceive endorsed products as more reliable, thus enhancing their intention to purchase [1, 6, 16]. Therefore, this study posits that the credibility of an influencer is directly linked to a follower's likelihood of making a purchase:

H1: SMI credibility has a positive influence on purchase intentions.

H2: SMI credibility has a positive influence on parasocial relationships.

H3: Parasocial relationships positively influence purchase intentions.

Parasocial relationships (PSRs) refer to the unidirectional emotional bonds that customers establish with influencers when followers regard influencers as friends or confidants in the absence of a genuine, reciprocal relationship [7]. PSRs develop over time through regular interactions, such as watching videos, reading posts, or engaging with content, fostering familiarity and emotional attachment [17]. In influencer marketing, PSRs play a vital role in enhancing the persuasive power of SMIs [18, 19]. Consumers who develop PSRs with influencers tend to trust their recommendations and perceive them as more authentic and relatable [8, 9]. These emotional connections foster a climate in which followers are more susceptible to the influencer's endorsements, establishing a link between the influencer's trustworthiness and consumer purchasing intentions [20, 21]. Consequently, PSRs can act as a mediating mechanism that explains how SMI credibility translates into consumer actions.

H4: Parasocial relationships mediate the relationship between SMI credibility and consumer purchase intentions.

2-2- Product Involvement

Product involvement describes the extent of personal significance or interest that consumers assign to a particular product category. It affects how consumers process information and purchase decisions, influencing their susceptibility to persuasive appeals [10]. For high-involvement products (e.g., electronics or financial services), consumers are more likely to engage in deliberate, rational evaluations and are more critical of credibility cues. Conversely, for low-involvement products (e.g., snacks or cosmetics), consumers are more prone to rely on emotional or peripheral cues, such as the perceived connection with the influencer, rather than detailed evaluations of product attributes [22].

The effect of product involvement on the relationships among SMI credibility, PSRs, and purchase intentions remains unclear [23] and requires further empirical evidence to provide clarity [24]. In this study, product involvement is proposed to moderate the effect of PSRs on consumer purchase intentions. Specifically, the emotional connection fostered through PSRs is expected to be more influential for low-involvement products, where consumers are less concerned with detailed product information and more open to emotional influence. This implies that the mediating role of PSRs between SMI credibility and purchase intentions is likely more vital for low-involvement products.

H5: Product involvement moderates the relationship between SMI Credibility and PSRs.

H6: Product involvement moderates the relationship between PSRs and consumer purchase intentions.

H7: Product involvement moderates the relationship between SMI Credibility and consumer purchase intentions.

H8: Product involvement moderates the mediation effect of PSRs on the relationship between SMI Credibility and consumer purchase intentions.

The conceptual framework of this study is depicted in Figure 1, as derived from the theoretical discussion.

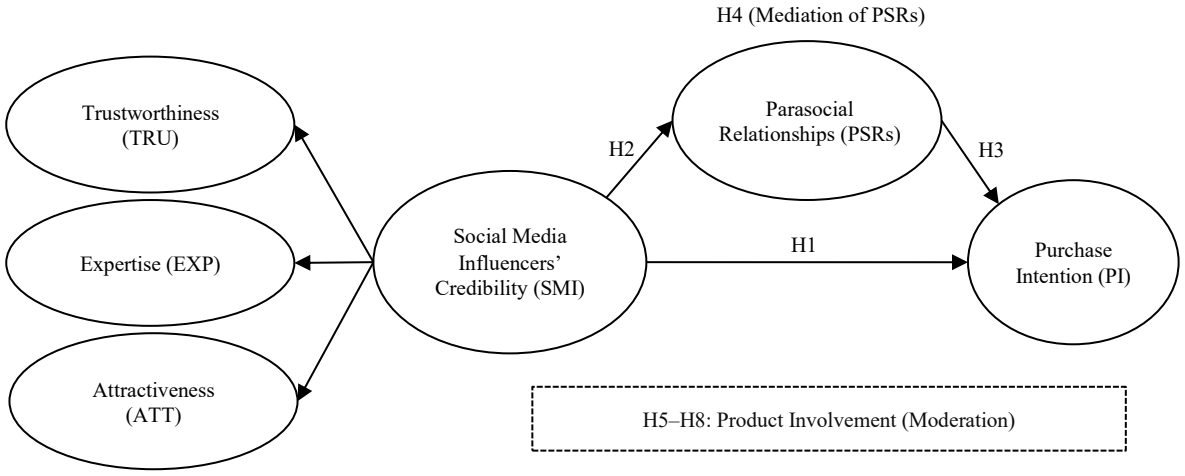


Figure 1. The conceptual framework

3- Research Method

This research utilized a quantitative survey methodology to examine the influence of social media influencers' credibility on customer purchase intentions, emphasizing the mediating role of parasocial relationships and the moderating effect of product involvement. The survey method was chosen to facilitate data collection from a large sample, allowing for statistical analysis of the relationships between variables. The following sections describe the research design, sampling procedure, data collection, and measurement of variables used in this study.

3-1- Research Design and Sampling Procedure

The target population consisted of social media users who actively follow SMIs and engage with influencer content across various product categories. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that participants had relevant experience with SMIs, thus allowing for more meaningful insights into the constructs under investigation. The sample was drawn from Thai consumers with prior experience interacting with SMIs across different product categories, ensuring that the results would be generalizable to diverse products. According to Kock & Hadaya (2018), a minimum sample size of 160 is adequate for PLS-SEM analysis. In total, 232 responses were received back [25]. After checking for incomplete or inconsistent responses, 205 valid questionnaires were retained for further analysis, which exceeded the recommended sample size and ensured robust data quality, representing an effective response rate of approximately 88.4%.

3-2- Data Collection

The data collection method involved administering an online questionnaire to Thai social media users. The questionnaire was distributed via popular survey platforms, including Google Forms and SurveyMonkey, and promoted through email and social media to reach the target audience. Participants were invited to complete the survey based on their familiarity with SMIs and recent interactions with influencer-endorsed products. Participants were asked to recall a specific interaction with a social media influencer who promoted a product they had recently considered or purchased. This approach allowed respondents to reflect on a real-life experience, enhancing the relevance and accuracy of their responses regarding social media influencers' credibility, parasocial relationships, product involvement, and purchase intentions.

3-3- Survey Instruments and Measures

The survey comprised two primary components. The initial part gathered demographic data, encompassing gender, age, education, occupation, and income level. This section also included questions about respondents' social media habits, particularly their engagement with influencers, and the product category of their most recent influencer interaction (e.g., beauty, electronics, food, and beverages). The second section measured the primary constructs of the study: social media influencers' credibility, parasocial relationships, product involvement, and consumer purchase intentions adapted from previous studies [1, 3-5, 7-8, 10, 11, 19]. All constructs were assessed utilizing a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scales were adapted from established research and modified slightly to fit the context of social media influencer marketing.

4- Results

4-1- Sample Profiles

The predominant demographic of responders was female (52.2%), aged 25–34 years (35.3%), single (56.3%), and possessed an undergraduate degree (66.4%). Most participants were private sector employees (40.7%) with an income between USD 559 and 978 (29.3%). Regarding social media usage, 34.8% of respondents spent 3–4 hours daily on social media, with Facebook (68.9%) and YouTube (57.3%) being the most frequently used platforms. TikTok (54.8%) and Instagram (52.3%) were also popular. Respondents most frequently interacted with influencers in the categories of fashion and beauty (44.7%), food and lifestyle (41.2%), and electronics and technology (34.7%), while a notable portion also engaged with influencers in health and fitness (31.7%) and travel and leisure (24.6%). The sample summary is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Item	Description	Sample	(%)
Gender	Male	98	47.8
	Female	107	52.2
Age	18–24	47	22.9
	25–34	72	35.3
	35–44	50	24.4
	45-54	26	12.6
	Above 55	9	4.6
Marital Status	Single	115	56.3
	Married	82	39.9
	Other	8	3.8

Education	Below Undergraduate	28	13.5
	Undergraduate	136	66.4
	Postgraduate	41	20.0
Occupation	Student	40	19.4
	Private Sector Employee	83	40.7
	Public Sector Employee	36	17.4
	Entrepreneur	30	14.4
	Other	19	9.1
Monthly Income (USD)	Below $559	55	26.8
	$559 – $978	60	29.3
	$979 – $1,397	45	22.0
	$1,397 – $2,794	30	14.6
	Above $2,794	15	7.3
Time Spent on Social Media Per Day	Less than 1 hour	22	10.8
	1–2 hours	59	28.8
	3–4 hours	71	34.8
	More than 4 hours	52	25.4
Social Media Platforms Frequently Used (Multiple responses)	Facebook	141	68.9
	TikTok	112	54.8
	Instagram	107	52.3
	YouTube	117	57.3
	Twitter	30	14.6
Categories of Social Media Influencers Engaged (Multiple responses)	Fashion and Beauty	92	44.7
	Food and Lifestyle	84	41.2
	Electronics and Technology	71	34.7
	Health and Fitness	65	31.7
	Travel and Leisure	50	24.6
	Other	29	14.1

4-2- The Measurement Model Assessment

This study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess the measurement model. The PLS-SEM methodology was selected for its capacity to manage intricate models, limited sample sizes, and non-normative data distributions, rendering it especially appropriate for exploratory research. SmartPLS 4 [26] was used for data analysis to examine the relationships among constructs, following the guidelines provided by Hair et al. (2017) [27]. The assessment of the measurement model entailed evaluating reliability and validity to confirm that the constructs and their indicators were accurately assessed. Specifically, this assessment was conducted using a hierarchical model where social media influencer credibility (SMI) was treated as a higher-order construct composed of trustworthiness (TRU), expertise (EXP), and attractiveness (ATT) as lower-order constructs. The disjoint two-stage approach was used in this study [28]. There are three steps: the assessment of the lower-order construct (LOC), the assessment of the higher-order construct (HOC), and the structural model assessment.

4-2-1- Assessment of the Lower-Order Constructs (LOCs)

Since the disjoint two-stage approach was used for assessing the higher-order construct (HOC) of social media influencers' credibility (SMI), the first stage of valuation involves all measurement models related to the lower-order components [29]. Consequently, the LOC of social media influencers' credibility (SMI) was directly linked to other theoretically interrelated constructs, as shown in Figure 2, and the following steps were undertaken for the analysis.

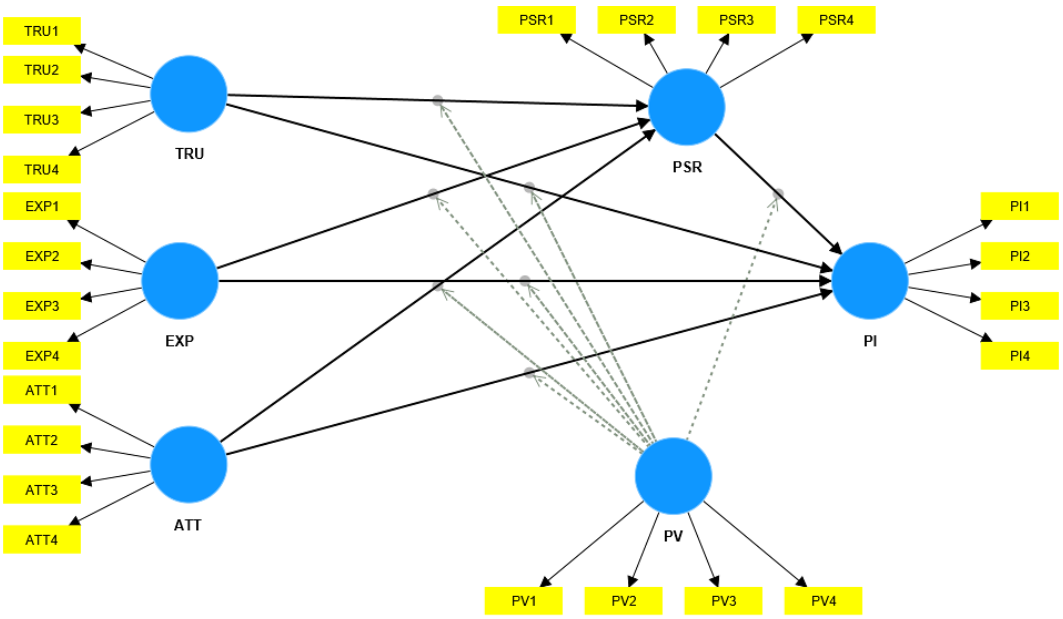


Figure 2. The first stage of the disjoint two-stage approach

The lower-order constructs of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness were assessed for convergent and discriminant validity through various measures, including indicator loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach's Alpha (CA), and composite reliability (CR) (see Table 2). Factor loadings were analyzed to verify the reliability of the indicators, with all item loadings surpassing the required threshold of 0.7, signifying robust indicator reliability. Furthermore, all factor loadings were statistically significant at 0.05, ensuring robustness. The AVE values for all constructs exceeded the 0.5 criterion, indicating sufficient convergent validity for the measurement model [30]. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite reliability (CR), both of which produced values exceeding 0.7 for all constructs, so affirming adequate internal consistency. These results indicate that the items within each construct were well-aligned in measuring their respective latent variables. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The findings indicated that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs, hence fulfilling the Fornell-Larcker criterion. In addition, all HTMT ratios were lower than the recommended threshold of 0.9, providing further evidence for discriminant validity [28]. The results indicate that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing a robust basis for further analysis.

Table 2. Measurement model results for lower-order constructs

Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Trustworthiness (TRU)	TRU1	0.816	0.830	0.897	0.684
	TRU2	0.831			
	TRU3	0.852			
	TRU4	0.821			
Expertise (EXP)	EXP1	0.825	0.822	0.894	0.678
	EXP2	0.818			
	EXP3	0.810			
	EXP4	0.792			
Attractiveness (ATT)	ATT1	0.814	0.825	0.895	0.681
	ATT2	0.828			
	ATT3	0.822			
	ATT4	0.793			
Parasocial Relationships (PSR)	PSR1	0.849	0.830	0.898	0.684
	PSR2	0.831			
	PSR3	0.804			
	PSR4	0.800			
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	0.825	0.820	0.891	0.675
	PI2	0.812			
	PI3	0.804			
	PI4	0.798			

Product Involvement (PV)	PV1	0.838	0.835	0.900	0.692
	PV2	0.821			
	PV3	0.834			
	PV4	0.805			

The Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio were employed to assess the discriminant validity of the measurement model [28]. Discriminant validity assures that constructs are unique and do not conceptually intersect. The Fornell-Larcker criterion indicates that the square root of the AVE values for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs, hence affirming discriminant validity. Moreover, the HTMT values, which evaluate the degree of similarity among constructs, were all under the suggested threshold of 0.9, thus confirming discriminant validity. Table 3 presents the results of the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio.

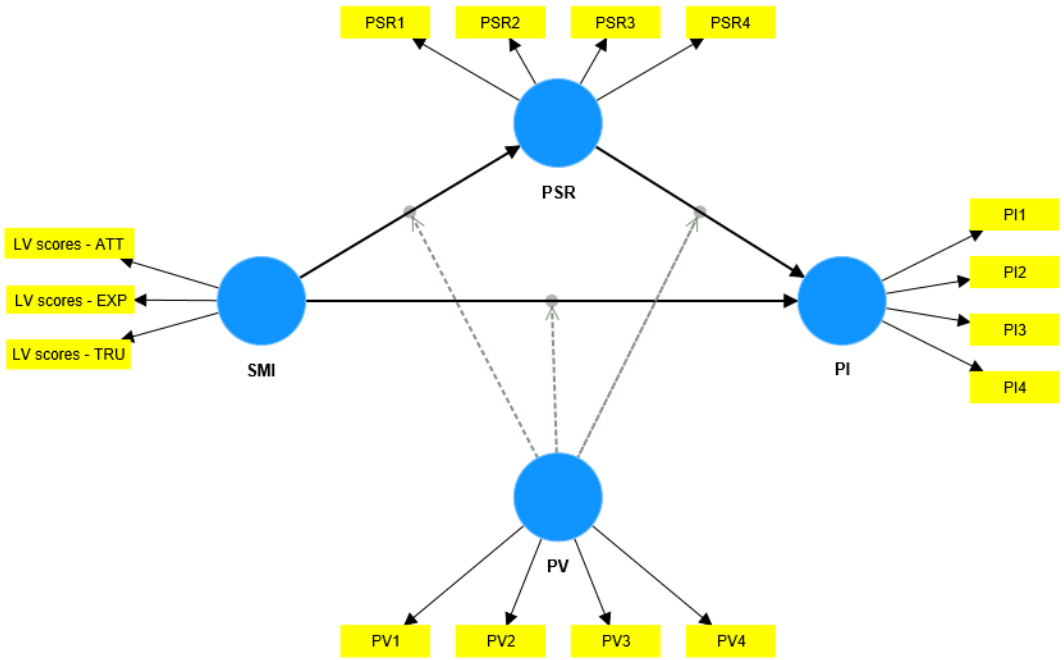
Table 3. The Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio are in the first stage

Construct	ATT	EXP	PI	PSR	PV	TRU
ATT	0.825					
EXP	0.687 (0.743)	0.823				
PI	0.680 (0.750)	0.664 (0.732)	0.822			
PSR	0.698 (0.764)	0.682 (0.749)	0.710 (0.782)	0.826		
PV	0.689 (0.758)	0.670 (0.741)	0.688 (0.765)	0.705 (0.772)	0.832	
TRU	0.662 (0.719)	0.693 (0.748)	0.654 (0.701)	0.670 (0.725)	0.671 (0.728)	0.827

Note: the square root of AVE is presented in diagonal; the value within the bracket is the value of the HTMT ratio.

4-2-2- Assessment of the Higher-Order Construct (HOC) in the Measurement Model

Once the measurement model's lower-order construct (LOC) assessment was accomplished, the measurement model's higher-order construct (HOC) was examined. SMI credibility in this study is the higher-order construct (HOC) of 3 dimensions: trustworthiness (TRU), expertise (EXP), and attractiveness (ATT). Following the disjoint two-stage approach, the LOC scores were first computed and then utilized as input variables for the HOC indicators representing social media influencers' credibility in the second stage. For parasocial relationships, purchase intention and product involvement constructs are included using original indicators. Figure 3 illustrates the second stage of the disjoint two-stage approach [29].



Note: Social Media Influencers' Credibility (SMI) is the higher-order construct of Trustworthiness (TRU), Expertise (EXP), Attractiveness (ATT).

Figure 3. The second stage of the disjoint two-stage approach

In the second stage of the disjoint two-stage approach, the measurement model of HOC was assessed concerning the HOC and its LOC. Table 4 represents factor loadings, Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of HOC's measurement model, which represents the satisfied reliability and validity of the HOC's measurement model.

Table 4. Indicator loadings, reliability, and validity of HOC

Sub-constructs of HOC	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Social Media Influencers' Credibility (SMI)		0.893	0.933	0.823
Trustworthiness (TRU)	0.914			
Expertise (EXP)	0.894			
Attractiveness (ATT)	0.914			

Note: CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted

In addition, Table 5 displays that the outcomes accomplish the standard criteria of the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which indicates an acceptable discriminant validity of HOC [29].

Table 5. Intercorrelations and Fornell-Larcker criterion of the latent variables in the second stage

	PI	PSRs	PV	SMI
PI	0.828			
PSRs	0.724	0.879		
PV1	0.668	0.557	0.815	
SMI	0.642	0.623	0.561	0.907

Note: the square root of AVE is presented diagonally

In addition to evaluating the reliability and validity of the measurement model, the multicollinearity issue was examined using variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. The results indicate that the overall VIFs for latent variables range from 1.626 to 2.798, all of which are below 3. It exhibits no issues with multicollinearity [30]. The Common Method Bias (CMB) issue was also tested by employing Harman's one-factor test. The principal components analysis was conducted to identify the number of factors that emerge without rotation [31, 32]. This analysis revealed the extraction of three main components, with the largest factor accounting for 43.11% of the variance. This result demonstrates no CMB issue in the dataset since no single factor dominates the variance explained. In summary, the measurement model achieves reliability and validity, which are eligible for further structural model evaluation.

4-3-Structural Model Assessment

To evaluate the hypotheses and validate the conceptual framework of this study, the PLS method was implemented via bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (see Table 6). Additionally, the effect size (f^2) was calculated to assess the strength of the relations among the constructs. The results of the PLS algorithm showed that social media influencers' credibility has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.296$, $t = 5.701$, $p = 0.000$, $f^2 = 0.111$) and parasocial relationships ($\beta = 0.631$, $t = 10.324$, $p = 0.000$, $f^2 = 0.729$), thus H1-H2 are supported. Parasocial relationships significantly effects purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.524$, $t = 9.636$, $p = 0.000$, $f^2 = 0.324$), thus H3 are supported. The R^2 values were also measured to estimate the model's explanatory power. The results show that the model has substantial explanatory power for purchase intentions ($R^2 = 0.576$) and parasocial relationships ($R^2 = 0.480$). Finally, Q^2 values were examined to test the predictive accuracy of the proposed PLS path model. The results recommend a moderate level of predictive accuracy for purchase intentions ($Q^2 = 0.430$) and parasocial relationships ($Q^2 = 0.470$). This analysis confirms the significance of the relationships within the model and offers vital insights into the model's explanatory and predictive capabilities.

Table 6. Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses Path	Estimate	T- statistics	P-value	Result
H1: SMI →PI	0.296	5.701	0.000	Supported
H2: SMI →PSR	0.631	10.324	0.000	Supported
H3: PSR →PI	0.524	9.636	0.000	Supported

As shown in Table 7, the mediation effects of parasocial relationships on the relationship between social media influencers' credibility and purchase intention were examined. The findings reveal that parasocial relationships partially mediate the impact of social media influencers' credibility and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.331$, $t = 8.355$, $p = 0.000$); thus, H4 is supported. These results indicate that parasocial relationships strengthen the positive relationship between social media influencers' credibility and purchase intention.

Table 7. The result of the mediation analysis

Path	Effects	Estimate	S.E.	T- Statistics	P-Values	Lower bound	Upper bound	Conclusion
SMI→PSR→PI	Specific indirect	0.331	0.040	8.355	0.000	0.257	0.412	Partial Mediation
SMI→ PI	Direct	0.296	0.052	5.701	0.000	0.194	0.395	
	Total	0.627	0.035	17.834	0.000	0.557	0.693	

To test hypotheses H5 to H7, a moderation analysis was conducted to examine the impact of product involvement on the relationships among SMI credibility, parasocial relationships, and purchase intention. Furthermore, for hypothesis 8, a conditional mediation (CoMe) analysis was employed to investigate the conditional mediation effect of parasocial relationships on the association between the credibility of social media influencers and purchase intentions across varying levels of product involvement. Table 8 presents the findings of the mediation and conditional mediation analysis conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

Table 8. The results of moderating effects of product involvement

	Estimate	S.E.	P values	Result
H5: SMI x PV → PI	-0.010	0.036	0.786	Not Supported
H6: SMI x PV → PSR	-0.118	0.046	0.011**	Supported
H7: PSR x PV → PI	-0.012	0.036	0.749	Not Supported
H8: SMI x PV → PSR → PI	-0.152	0.050	0.002***	Supported

*** p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05; * p-value < 0.10; SMI = Social media influencer; PSR = Parasocial relationships; PI = Purchase intention; PV = Product Involvement

The results in Table 8 indicated significant moderating variables in the framework. Product involvement is the significant moderating variable from social media influencers' credibility to parasocial relationships (B = -0.118, p = 0.011); thus, H6 is supported. A negative coefficient (B = -0.118) suggests that as product involvement increases, the strength of the relationship between social media influencers' credibility and parasocial relationships decreases. Product involvement also significantly moderates the mediation effect of parasocial relationships on the relationship between social media influencers' credibility and purchase intention (B = -0.152, p = 0.002); thus, H8 is supported. A negative coefficient (B = -0.152) indicates that the mediation effect of parasocial relationships is weaker at higher levels of product involvement. However, product involvement was not found to be significant to moderate a path from social media influencers' credibility to purchase intention (B = -0.010, p = 0.786) and a path from parasocial relationships to purchase intention (B = -0.012, p = 0.749); thus, H5 and H7 are not supported.

5- Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of social media influencer (SMI) credibility on consumer purchase intentions, focusing on the mediating role of parasocial relationships (PSRs) and the moderating role of product involvement. Using data from 205 Thai consumers, the findings corroborate and extend the existing literature by confirming the intricate relationships among SMI credibility, PSRs, product involvement, and purchase intentions. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypotheses, and the results offer both theoretical contributions and practical implications. The results confirmed that SMI credibility positively influences both purchase intentions and PSRs [33]. These findings align with prior research that underscores the significance of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness in influencing customer attitudes and behaviors [3, 4, 12, 34-35]. SMIs perceived as credible foster consumer confidence in their recommendations, directly enhancing purchase intentions. This aligns with research suggesting that credible influencers act as reliable sources of information, positively influencing consumer behavior through trust and perceived authenticity [1, 6, 36]. Furthermore, SMI credibility's significant effect on PSRs underscores the role of emotional connections in influencer marketing, reaffirming prior findings that credibility enhances parasocial bonds by making influencers appear relatable and authentic [8, 9, 37].

The mediation analysis revealed that PSRs partially mediate the relationship between SMI credibility and purchase intentions, reinforcing the importance of emotional connections in consumer decision-making. This aligns with Horton and Wohl's (1956) foundational theory of parasocial interactions, which emphasizes the persuasive power of one-sided emotional bonds in influencing behavior [7]. Prior studies have also emphasized the critical role of emotional factors in bridging the gap between influencer credibility and purchase outcomes [8, 38]. By demonstrating the mediating role of PSRs, this study extends the literature by illustrating how emotional bonds translate influencer credibility into actionable consumer behavior. The study did not distinguish between strong and weak parasocial relationships. However, stronger parasocial bonds may enhance purchase intentions for high-involvement products by increasing trust, while weaker bonds may rely more on rational evaluation, reducing their impact in such contexts. The moderation analysis provides

further insights into the role of product involvement in shaping the effectiveness of influencer marketing. The results indicate that product involvement significantly moderates the relationship between SMI credibility and PSRs and the conditional mediation effect of PSRs on the relationship between SMI credibility and purchase intentions. Specifically, the findings reveal that the strength of these relationships diminishes as product involvement increases, suggesting that PSRs are more influential for low-involvement products. This supports Zaichkowsky's (1985) framework, which posits that consumers evaluating low-involvement products rely more on emotional cues, such as PSRs than detailed product evaluations [10]. These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the importance of emotional appeals in low-involvement contexts [11, 39, 23]. Conversely, consumers engage in more rational processing for high-involvement products, focusing on product attributes and influencer expertise rather than emotional connections [5, 24]. The study did not investigate the impact of parasocial relationships on high-involvement product purchases through brand trust or long-term engagement. Nevertheless, strong PSRs may foster trust and sustained consumer interest, potentially leading to delayed but meaningful purchases. Interestingly, product involvement did not significantly moderate the direct relationship between SMI credibility and purchase intentions or the relationship between PSRs and purchase intentions. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that while product involvement shapes mediated pathways, the direct effects of credibility and emotional bonds on purchase intentions are robust across varying levels of involvement [20]. This implies that SMI credibility and PSRs remain universally relevant drivers of purchase behavior, irrespective of product involvement levels.

The findings highlight that influencer marketing works through both emotional and cognitive pathways, but their importance varies depending on product involvement. In low-involvement product categories, consumers are more likely to be persuaded through strong parasocial relationships, where familiarity and emotional connection drive purchase intentions. This suggests that trust and authenticity in an influencer's persona become crucial when promoting everyday, habitual purchases where cognitive effort is minimal. In contrast, for high-involvement products, expertise and detailed product knowledge play a dominant role, as the decision-making process requires greater scrutiny. While influencer credibility remains vital across all contexts, the specific dimensions of credibility that matter most—emotional or cognitive—depend on the consumer's level of involvement with the product. These insights advance the understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness, showing that emotional engagement with influencers is not a universal driver but is influenced by product category relevance. Consequently, brands need to take a strategic approach, aligning their influencer selection with the expected level of consumer engagement and cognitive involvement in the purchasing process. This study makes several notable theoretical contributions. First, this study enhances the understanding of social media influencers' impact on consumer purchase intentions. It highlights the mediating role of parasocial relationships and the conditional nature of this mediation based on product involvement.

The findings emphasize the importance of integrating emotional and cognitive pathways in consumer decision-making. When designing influencer marketing strategies, marketers should consider the level of product involvement. For low-involvement products, leveraging influencers who have cultivated strong parasocial relationships can be more effective in eliciting emotional responses and driving impulsive purchase decisions from consumers. Conversely, for high-involvement products, marketers should emphasize influencers' expertise and credibility to facilitate rational decision-making processes among consumers. A balanced approach that integrates both emotional engagement and informational value can align influencer marketing efforts with the varying decision-making mechanisms of consumers based on product involvement levels. Second, it contributes to the limited body of research on how product involvement moderates the interaction between emotional and rational pathways. It highlights the dual mechanisms through which SMIs influence purchase intentions—emotional (via PSRs) and rational (via credibility). The findings provide actionable insights for brands and marketers from a managerial perspective. For low-involvement products, marketers should prioritize leveraging influencers who foster strong emotional connections with their followers. For high-involvement products, marketers should emphasize the expertise and trustworthiness of influencers, ensuring that their endorsements align with the product's key attributes and the rational evaluation processes of the target audience. Additionally, marketers should recognize the importance of tailoring influencer marketing strategies based on product involvement levels. For example, brands promoting low-involvement products can benefit from collaborating with influencers who excel at creating relatable, emotionally resonant content. In contrast, high-involvement products may require partnerships with influencers with domain-specific expertise and credibility.

6- Conclusion

This research provides significant insights into how social media influencers impact consumer purchase intentions through the mediating role of parasocial relationships and the moderating effect of product involvement. The findings indicate that SMI credibility positively affects purchase intentions, with this relationship being partially mediated by PSRs, highlighting the importance of emotional connections in shaping consumer behavior. Moreover, the study emphasizes that product involvement moderates the mediating impact of PSRs. The influence of PSRs on purchase intentions is particularly pronounced for low-involvement products, where emotional appeals and influencer ties exert greater sway than rational assessments. While this study contributes theoretical and practical implications, certain

limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of a quantitative survey method may introduce self-reporting bias, as participants' responses could be influenced by social desirability. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture the dynamics of consumer behavior over time. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to explore the evolving relationships between SMI credibility, PSRs, and purchase intentions. Additionally, the sample from Thai social media users may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural and economic contexts, and comparative studies across different countries and regions are encouraged to validate these findings in diverse settings. Lastly, this study focuses on product involvement as a moderator; future research could explore other potential moderating variables, such as consumer personality traits, cultural values, or influencer-specific factors like content style and frequency of engagement, to gain deeper insights into the mechanisms driving influencer effectiveness. Future research should explore how individual personality traits, such as susceptibility to influence, cognitive need, and trust tendency, shape responses to influencers. Additionally, cultural values like individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty tolerance could impact influencer effectiveness through trust and purchase decisions. Understanding these factors can improve influencer marketing strategies. Longitudinal approaches to track changes in influencer credibility and parasocial relationships over time, as well as cross-cultural comparisons to reveal differences in consumer responses to influencer marketing, could also provide valuable insights. Further research could examine how influencer credibility impacts long-term brand loyalty or how new social media platforms shape parasocial relationships and consumer behavior.

7- Declarations

7-1- Author Contributions

Conceptualization, D.H. and S.T.; methodology, D.H. and S.T.; software, S.T.; validation, D.H.; formal analysis, S.T.; investigation, S.T.; resources, D.H. and S.T.; data curation, D.H.; writing—original draft preparation, D.H. and S.T.; writing—review and editing, D.H. and S.T.; visualization, D.H. and S.T.; supervision, D.H.; project administration, S.T.; funding acquisition, D.H. and S.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

7-2- Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to IRB stipulations but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

7-3- Funding

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7-4- Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research of Bangkok University (Ref. No. 416812054).

7-5- Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

7-6- Declaration of Competing Interest

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.

7-7- Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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