

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND ATTITUDE IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INFLUENCERS MARKETING ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND PURCHASE INTENTION IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Social media marketing has become a crucial strategy for restaurants seeking to attract and retain customers in a competitive environment. Among the various digital marketing tools, influencer marketing has emerged as a powerful approach for shaping consumer attitudes and driving purchase behaviour. However, despite its widespread adoption, there is limited empirical understanding of how influencer characteristics affect consumer responses in the restaurant context. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, this study aims to examine how influencer trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily influence consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention in Saudi Arabia's casual dining sector. It further explores the mediating role of brand attitude in these relationships.

Methodology: Data were collected through an online survey targeting active social media followers of casual dining restaurants in Saudi Arabia. A total of 343 valid responses were obtained using purposive sampling. The data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with bootstrapping to test direct and mediating relationships among the study variables.

Findings: Results reveal that influencer trustworthiness and expertise significantly enhance brand attitude and purchase intention, while homophily does not have a significant direct effect on purchase intention. Brand attitude positively influences purchase intention and mediates the effects of all three influencer attributes on purchase intention.

Contributions: This study contributes to Stimuli-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework by clarifying how specific influencer traits shape consumer decision-making in restaurant contexts. Practically, it offers guidance for restaurant marketers in selecting influencers and fostering favourable brand attitudes to optimize social media marketing outcomes.

Keywords: Social media influencers, brand attitude, purchase intention, casual dining restaurants.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of users' daily lives, providing ubiquitous access to vast amounts of information across the globe (Al-Muani et al., 2023; Hmoud et al., 2022). The rapid growth in social media adoption has reshaped marketing trends and strategies, leading firms to regard social platforms as critical channels for communicating and engaging with customers (Chetoui et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2023). Reflecting this shift, a recent report indicates that approximately 73% of marketers believe social media can effectively support their marketing campaigns. This confidence is closely linked to the continuous expansion of the global social media user base. For instance, more than 4.26 billion individuals worldwide were using social media in 2021, and this figure is projected to reach 6 billion by 2027 (González-Serrano et al., 2024). In the current digital era, social media has thus emerged as the dominant mode of communication worldwide. This pattern is also evident in Saudi Arabia, where social media usage is exceptionally high, with more than 90% of the population reported to be active on social networks (Mabkhot et al., 2022). In earlier years, businesses and companies primarily relied on celebrities' fame and social status to promote their brands. However, the evolution of social media platforms has shifted attention toward social media influencers, whose prominence as persuasive endorers has grown substantially (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

The proliferation of social media users has catalysed the emergence of Social Media Influencer Marketing as a distinct digital marketing paradigm (Shan et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021). This contemporary marketing approach involves brands collaborating with prominent social media personalities to endorse products and services across digital platforms (Glucksman, 2017). Conceptually, influencer marketing encompasses the strategic utilisation of endorsements, sponsorships, or product placements by influential individuals or organisations as a social media marketing mechanism (Bu et al., 2022; Kay et al., 2020). More specifically, it represents a strategic framework wherein marketers identify and engage individuals who command substantial followings and social media prominence to communicate brand messages to designated target audiences (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

The strategic significance of influencer marketing has been substantiated through robust empirical evidence. Recognised as a sustainable long-term digital marketing strategy for businesses (Ki et al., 2020), the global influencer marketing industry achieved a valuation of USD148 million in 2019 representing an 8% year-over-year growth with projections exceeding USD373 million within six years (Bu et al., 2022). Lou and Yuan. (2019), further documented that 94% of marketers perceive influencer marketing campaigns as effective, while 89% report that its return on investment equals or surpasses alternative marketing strategies (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Notably, influencer marketing demonstrates an effectiveness rate 11 times greater than traditional advertising methods (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Saudi Arabia represents one of the Middle East's most extensive geographical territories, with a total population of 35 million, the nation exhibits a notably youthful demographic profile, wherein nearly half of residents are below 31 years of age (Alomair, 2022). The Saudi economy ranks among the world's top 20 largest economies and is characterized as a rapidly developing market (Times, 2016). The restaurant sector in Saudi Arabia has experienced substantial transformation, with investment exceeding 17 billion Saudi Riyals (Alomair, 2022). This growth trajectory has positioned Saudi Arabia as one of the world's leading consumer-oriented economies. The nation currently ranks as the fourth-highest consuming country globally, with restaurants and hospitality establishments serving as primary consumption destinations for Saudi consumers (Alomair, 2022).

Within the Saudi restaurant landscape, casual dining establishments constitute a significant segment. These establishments are characterized by their hybrid service model, combining elements of quick-service and fine dining formats while offering moderately priced menu items within an informal ambiance (Bushara et al., 2023). The casual dining sector has

demonstrated consistent market share expansion in recent years (Arora et al., 2022). Contemporary casual dining restaurant marketers leverage influencer marketing to enhance consumer attitude and stimulate initial purchase intention among potential consumers.

The voluntary nature of follower-influencer relationships enhances consumers' propensity to trust and accept influencers' perspectives and recommendations (Gomes et al., 2022). Understanding the determinants of influencer marketing effectiveness has become increasingly critical for both marketing practitioners and academic researchers. Influencer marketing success is contingent upon multiple factors, particularly influencer-specific attributes such as trustworthiness, expertise, and perceived homophily (Aggad & Sh, 2021; Chetoui et al., 2020; Hmoud et al., 2022; Ladhari et al., 2020). Empirical evidence demonstrates that these attributes significantly shape consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions, representing crucial outcomes for businesses implementing influencer marketing strategies (Al Kurdi et al., 2022).

Brand attitude constitutes a pivotal construct within consumer behaviour literature, exerting substantial influence on both purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour (Al-Muani et al., 2023). Favourable brand attitudes have been associated with increased purchase activity, whereas negative attitudes can discourage potential customers and compromise brand reputation (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Zhao et al., 2024). While existing research has established that social media influencers significantly affect consumer purchase intentions in developed markets, scholarly inquiry into influencer marketing within developing economy like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region remains limited (Aggad & Sh, 2021).

Furthermore, considerable knowledge gaps persist regarding the optimal utilization of this emergent marketing phenomenon by practitioners (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Given that influencer marketing theory and practice remain in nascent stages of development (Chekima et al., 2020), more comprehensive and rigorous investigation is essential to advance the literature and inform marketing practice (Aggad & Sh, 2021; AlFarraj et al., 2021; Al-Muani et al., 2023; Hmoud et al., 2022). Consequently, this study examines the influence of social media influencer trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily on consumer purchase intention, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of brand attitude.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Stimuli-Organism-Response Theory

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) originally proposed the stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) framework, which was subsequently refined by Jacoby (2002). The framework posits that environmental cues function as stimuli (S) that shape individuals' internal affective and cognitive states (O), which in turn give rise to observable behavioural responses (R) (Ngah, Thurasamy, Mohamad, et al., 2023). This perspective has been extensively adopted in marketing research, including investigations of advertising effects and celebrity endorsement, among other domains (Al Mamun et al., 2023; Lacroix et al., 2020; Ngah, Thurasamy, Mohamad, et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2020).

The S–O–R framework assumes that external stimuli do not exert a direct influence on consumer behaviour; rather, they operate indirectly by first shaping consumers' internal states, which in turn determine behavioural outcomes (Hussain et al., 2023). In line with this view, the theory is considered sufficiently flexible to be adapted to diverse research contexts, provided that the core stimulus–organism–response logic is maintained (Ngah et al., 2021). Within this framework, “stimuli” are conceptualised as external factors that impact an individual's internal state and subsequently behaviour (Min et al., 2019).

Given the focus of the present study, stimuli are operationalised as the influencer characteristics. Specifically, influencer trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily are

conceptualised as perceived external stimuli that precede consumers' internal cognitive and affective evaluations within the SOR framework. The "organism" component captures consumers' internal cognitive and affective reactions after exposure to these stimuli, during which they form evaluations, beliefs, and attitudes toward brands (Min et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study treats consumers' attitudes toward endorsed brands as the organism. Finally, the "response" element represents the resulting behaviour, which in this study is operationalised as consumers' purchase intention.

2.2 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention denotes the strength of a consumer's psychological commitment to acquiring a particular product or service (Anas et al., 2023). It can be understood as the perceived likelihood that a consumer will proceed with a purchase, shaped by perceived benefits, emotional reactions, and prior experiences with the product or service (Morwitz, 2014). More broadly, intention represents an individual's proximal inclination to perform a specific behaviour and functions as a key indicator of motivational readiness to act.

Purchase intention can be understood as the joint expression of a consumer's interest in a specific product and the perceived likelihood of purchasing it, thereby closely mirroring the consumer's underlying preference for that brand or product (Al Mamun et al., 2023). In line with (Rebelo, 2017), social media users' purchase intentions may be reflected in several ways: when users simulate or imagine purchasing the product, when they perceive a likelihood that they will purchase it, or when they express a willingness to buy the product endorsed by influencers on these platforms.

Within the restaurant sector, a strong association is frequently observed between consumers' behavioural intentions and their actual purchase behaviour. In essence, individuals who exhibit a strong desire or plan to dine at a particular restaurant are more likely to translate this intention into an actual visit and purchase. Accordingly, restaurant purchase intention can be described as the extent to which prospective customers are motivated and willing to patronise a restaurant and purchase its food and beverage offerings (Jani & Han, 2011).

2.3 Social Media Influencers

With escalating consumer demands and expectations, marketers continually innovate their strategies to forge effective emotional connections with target audiences. This has propelled the integration of influencer endorsements into advertising, as these approaches elicit consumers' attitudinal and affective responses while shaping brand preferences and purchase behaviours (Alomair, 2022; Min et al., 2019).

Social media influencers (SMIs) are individuals who have established substantial and engaged followings, with content primarily reaching audiences who voluntarily choose to interact (Aggad & Sh, 2021). Operating as third-party endorsers, they specialise in niche domains such as beauty, food, fashion, or life style and fitness, delivering recommendations, product descriptions, and information across diverse social platforms to shape audience attitudes (Alomair, 2022; Mabkhot et al., 2022; Putri & Tiarawati, 2021). Empirical evidence confirms that digital influencers positively influence purchase intentions (Aggad & Sh, 2021; Al-Muani et al., 2023; Bu et al., 2022; Ladhari et al., 2020), while prior studies demonstrate that influencer marketing outperforms traditional advertising channels like radio or television in both cost-efficiency and speed of audience persuasion, owing to followers' rapid responsiveness to credible endorsers (Mabkhot et al., 2022).

2.4 Influencer Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in influencer marketing refers to the extent to which consumers perceive an influencer as honest, reliable, and dependable when sharing opinions, recommendations, or endorsements of products and services (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). It represents a foundational element of persuasive communication, as trust shapes how audiences interpret influencer-generated messages and, ultimately, how they respond behaviourally to those messages (Al-Muani et al., 2023; Casalo et al., 2020).

Early work in persuasion research highlights the importance of trust in the message source, showing that perceived credibility significantly enhances the effectiveness of an endorser and positively influences consumers' evaluations of advertising content (Sternthal et al., 1978). Building on this perspective, Lou and Yuan (2019) conceptualize influencer trustworthiness as audience perceptions rooted in sincerity, and honesty (Lou & Yuan, 2019). While more recent studies have expanded the construct by identifying additional dimensions and contextual drivers of trust, scholars consistently emphasize that trustworthiness remains a central determinant of influencer effectiveness.

In the context of social media, influencers often integrate brand endorsements into their personal narratives, demonstrate product usage, and share first-hand experiences with their followers. This practice contributes to perceptions of authenticity and relatability, which, in turn, reinforce trust among audiences (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). As a result, consumers are more likely to view influencers as credible sources of information rather than as traditional advertisers.

Given this dynamic, trustworthiness is not merely a desirable attribute but a necessary condition for persuasive influence. Influencers who successfully establish and maintain trust are better positioned to shape attitudes and intentions, whereas those perceived as insincere or opportunistic risk losing credibility and audience engagement. Accordingly, eliciting and sustaining trustworthiness is essential for influencers seeking to exert meaningful persuasive impact on their followers (Schouten et al., 2021).

Brand attitude has long been established as a central construct in marketing, underscoring its critical role in shaping consumers' intentions and behaviours (Al-Muani et al., 2023; Azjen, 1980). Review of prior research reveals that influencer trustworthiness exerts a significant influence on consumers' brand attitudes across diverse contexts. For instance, Chekima et al. (2020) demonstrated that trustworthiness positively shapes product attitudes. Similarly, Nafees et al. (2020) established its impact on product attitudes, while Hmoud et al. (2022) reported comparable findings Instagram users in Jordan (Chekima et al., 2020; Hmoud et al., 2022; Nafees et al., 2020). Despite the established effects of influencer trustworthiness on brand attitudes, this relationship remains underexplored within developing markets like Saudi Arabia and niche sectors such as casual dining restaurants. Addressing this gap through further empirical investigation is essential, as it carries critical implications for marketers in optimising endorser selection and crafting targeted strategies.

Trustworthiness characteristics are fundamentally predicated on fulfilling promises and upholding honesty (Bonnevie et al., 2020). Recent empirical studies have established a robust positive relationship between social media influencers' trustworthiness and purchase intention across diverse contexts, including beauty products in France (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), Japanese cuisine in Thailand (Laohasukkasem et al., 2021), and skincare products in Malaysia (Al Mamun et al., 2023). Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Influencers' trustworthiness has a positive impact on brand attitude.

H2: Influencers' trustworthiness has a positive impact on purchase intention.

2.5 Influencer Expertise

Expertise constitutes a core dimension of source credibility alongside trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990), defined as the perceived extent of an influencers' knowledge, skills, and understanding in a given domain (Erdogan, 1999; Masuda et al., 2022; Rebelo, 2017). This attribute functions similarly to a formal qualification, directly enhancing the endorser's capacity to persuade consumers toward product or service adoption (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018). Scholars consistently recognise expertise as the paramount factor for successful endorsements (Mabkhot et al., 2022), as it elevates the perceived validity of the communicator's assertions and amplifies message persuasiveness, thereby increasing consumers' receptivity and likelihood of behavioural compliance (Al-Muani et al., 2023).

The rapid expansion of social media influencers has significantly amplified this marketing approach, facilitating unprecedented access to consumer cognition (Kim & Kim, 2021). Businesses can now strategically select influencers whose backgrounds and expertise align closely with the products or services being promoted. Previous studies have demonstrated that when consumers perceive influencers as domain experts, they exhibit heightened trust in their recommendations and endorsements, which in turn elevates purchase intentions (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Similarly, (Weismueller et al., 2020) identified a positive association in the German cosmetics market. Collectively, these findings indicate that influencer expertise exerts a consistent influence on purchase intention across diverse markets.

Expertise is a central dimension of source credibility and refers to the extent to which an endorser is perceived as having the knowledge, competence, and experience to serve as a dependable source of information (Erdogan, 1999). Endorsers or influencers regarded as experts are expected to provide more reliable and authoritative information compared to those who lack relevant background or contextual understanding. Consequently, audiences are more likely to consider an influencer an expert only when they perceive the individual as skilful, and knowledgeable within a specific domain (Hmoud et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2021).

A high level of perceived expertise not only enhances the influencer's credibility but also strengthens the persuasive power of their messages. Endorsers recognized for their expertise tend to elicit greater engagement the promoted brand (Ohanian, 1990). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that expertise plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward brands. Specifically, when an influencer is viewed as an expert in their field, the information they communicate is more readily accepted and internalized by the audience, leading to a more favourable attitude toward the endorsed brand.

The robustness of this relationship has been validated across various industries. For instance, (Chekima et al., 2020) found that influencer expertise significantly influences consumers' product attitudes in the cosmetics industry. Similarly, Dhun and Dangi (2023) provided empirical support for the positive effect of influencer expertise on brand attitude formation among Instagram users. Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

H3: Influencers' expertise has a positive impact on brand attitude.

H4: Influencers' expertise has a positive impact on purchase intention.

2.6 Influencer Homophily

Homophily is commonly defined as the extent of perceived similarity between two individuals who interact, particularly with respect to their beliefs, values, education, and social status (Ao et al., 2023). In the context of online communication, (O'Reilly et al., 2016) describe homophily as the user's assessment of how similar an online source is to them in terms of character, background, and expectations. In the influencer and endorsement literature, the term similarity is frequently employed interchangeably with homophily (Dhun & Dangi, 2023),

capturing the degree to which the message source and the message recipient resemble one another.

In essence, homophily reflects how closely aligned the message source is with the audience based on experiences, preferences, and values. This perceived similarity has important implications for marketing communication effectiveness. Prior research suggests that advertisements tend to be more persuasive when endorsers are perceived as similar to the target consumers in terms of culture, beliefs, or demographic characteristics (Munnukka et al., 2016). This notion resonates with the well-known adage, “birds of a feather flock together,” emphasizing that individuals are more receptive to, and influenced by, sources they perceive as similar to themselves.

Within the domain of social media influencer marketing, homophily emerges as a particularly salient attribute. Social media environments are characterized by a high level of interaction and engagement between influencers and their audiences, which elevates the importance of perceived similarity (Arora et al., 2019; Masuda et al., 2022). Earlier studies have demonstrated that similarity between influencers and followers significantly enhances the influencer’s social appeal (Gonzales et al., 1983). Building on this, recent research has shown that homophily influences individuals’ willingness to seek opinions, resonate with others, and engage in social networking activities (Bu et al., 2022; Ladhari et al., 2020).

Perceived homophily can foster multiple relational and informational outcomes, including greater inclination to seek information from influencers, the development of interpersonal relationships with them, and increased willingness to share their content (Ladhari et al., 2020). Consequently, contemporary scholars increasingly employ the concept of homophily to explain followers’ reactions to the content produced by influencers, opinion leaders, and celebrities in digital and social media contexts (Ladhari et al., 2020). Numerous studies have examined homophily in diverse contexts and consistently demonstrated its capacity to stimulate and sustain interaction. For instance, (Kim & Kim, 2021) found that homophily exerts a positive influence on customer purchase intention. Complementing these findings, a study conducted in the United States by (Lou & Yuan, 2019) reported that perceived homophily between influencers and consumers positively enhances consumers’ purchase intentions.

A growing body of endorsement research indicates that higher degree of perceived similarity is consistently associated with more favourable attitudes toward the advertised brand and, in turn, greater advertising effectiveness (Ao et al., 2023; Munnukka et al., 2016). While early work placed substantial emphasis on specific attributes like physical attractiveness, subsequent empirical evidence suggests that attractiveness has a relatively weaker impact on advertising outcomes compared to other credibility dimensions (Amos et al., 2008). In response, scholars have increasingly highlighted the importance of congruence, or “fit,” between the spokesperson’s characteristics and the brand that are salient to consumers (Ilicic et al., 2015), implying that different endorser attributes may be differentially effective depending on product category and endorsement context.

Within this broader perspective, homophily has emerged as a particularly influential component of endorser credibility. Previous study (Schouten et al., 2021) demonstrate that key credibility facets as similarity, and others collectively enhance favourable attitudes toward endorsed products such as fitness, and fashion. Importantly, prior work suggests that similarity between the message source and consumers can be more consequential for shaping brand attitudes than other affective responses such as likeability as cited in (Munnukka et al., 2016). Endorsers who resemble the target audience are generally regarded as more effective because such similarity facilitates identification and allows consumers to relate more easily to the endorser (Dhun & Dangi, 2023; Hughes et al., 2019). This, in turn, supports the development of more positive brand attitudes. Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

H5: Influencers' homophily has a positive impact on brand attitude.

H6: Influencers' homophily has a positive impact on purchase intention.

2.7 Brand Attitude

Brand attitude denotes a consumer's overall evaluative judgment toward a brand, shaped by their cognitive and affective responses to brand-related stimuli (Al-Muani et al., 2023; Eagly, 1993; Hmoud et al., 2022). It reflects a relatively stable and enduring predisposition that guides consumer behaviour over time (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). In marketing, brand attitude is widely regarded as a key antecedent of consumer decision-making and behavioural intentions toward a product or service ((Mitchell & Olson, 1981). For businesses, cultivating a favourable brand attitude is strategically important, as it strengthens brand image. Empirical evidence from the fast-food sector indicates that by evoking positive emotional responses, restaurants can effectively shape brand attitude and, in turn, stimulate purchase intention among consumers (Afandi & Marsasi, 2023; Pérez-Villarreal et al., 2019).

A robust body of theoretical and empirical literature affirms that brand attitude exerts a significant influence on consumers' purchase intention such as the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Within this framework, MacKenzie and Spreng (1992) argue that favourable brand attitudes strengthen purchase intention by enhancing consumer motivation (MacKenzie & Spreng, 1992). In the domain of influencer marketing, (Al-Muani et al., 2023) emphasize that attitude toward the brand plays a pivotal role in shaping consumers' intention to buy, particularly in contexts where influencers act as credible sources of brand information. These findings underscore the importance of understanding consumers' attitudes toward advertised brand, as such attitudes are critical in determining the effectiveness of marketing efforts across diverse industries and cultural settings. Empirical studies across developed economies consistently report a strong and significant relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention (Chetioui et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2022; Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017). Building on this theoretical and empirical foundation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Brand attitude has a positive impact on purchase intention.

2.8 Mediating Effect of Brand Attitude

Several prior studies have examined brand attitude as a mediating mechanism linking different antecedents to purchase intention. Sallam and Wahid (2012) demonstrated that brand attitude significantly mediates the relationship between attitude toward advertising and purchase intention in the context of Yemeni consumers. Likewise, Al-Muani et al. (2023) provided empirical support for the mediating role of brand attitude between influencer marketing and purchase intention. Furthermore, Kunja et al. (2022) confirmed that brand attitude plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and purchase intention, specifically within smartphone brand fan pages on Facebook in India (Kunja et al., 2022).

The positive influence of brand attitude on consumers' purchase intention has been extensively documented in both traditional marketing and e-commerce contexts, where favourable brand evaluations consistently predict stronger purchase intentions (Dall'Olmo Riley et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2024). In the present study, which investigates the impact of influencer attributes on purchase intention in the under-explored context of casual dining restaurants in Saudi Arabia, brand attitude is positioned as a mediating construct within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. This theoretical configuration is both logical and contextually relevant, as influencer marketing functions as the external stimulus,

brand attitude captures the internal cognitive–affective state (organism), and purchase intention represents the behavioural response.

This SOR-based mediation model enables a more nuanced understanding of the causal chain linking influencer marketing to consumer behaviour, moving beyond simple direct effects to uncover the underlying psychological mechanism (Zhao et al., 2024). Influencer marketing is fundamentally a source-driven communication strategy, in which the influencer’s perceived trustworthiness, homophily, and expertise shape consumers’ evaluations of the endorsed brand. Brand attitude, in turn, reflects the overall evaluative judgment formed after exposure to these stimuli, thereby serving as a key explanatory mechanism through which influencer marketing ultimately influences purchase decisions (Handranata & Kalila, 2025). Thus, this study hypothesises that:

H8: Brand attitude mediates the relationship between Influencers’ trustworthiness and purchase intention.

H9: Brand attitude mediates the relationship between Influencers’ expertise and purchase intention.

H10: Brand attitude mediates the relationship between Influencers’ homophily and purchase intention.

The research framework of the study is presented in Figure 1.

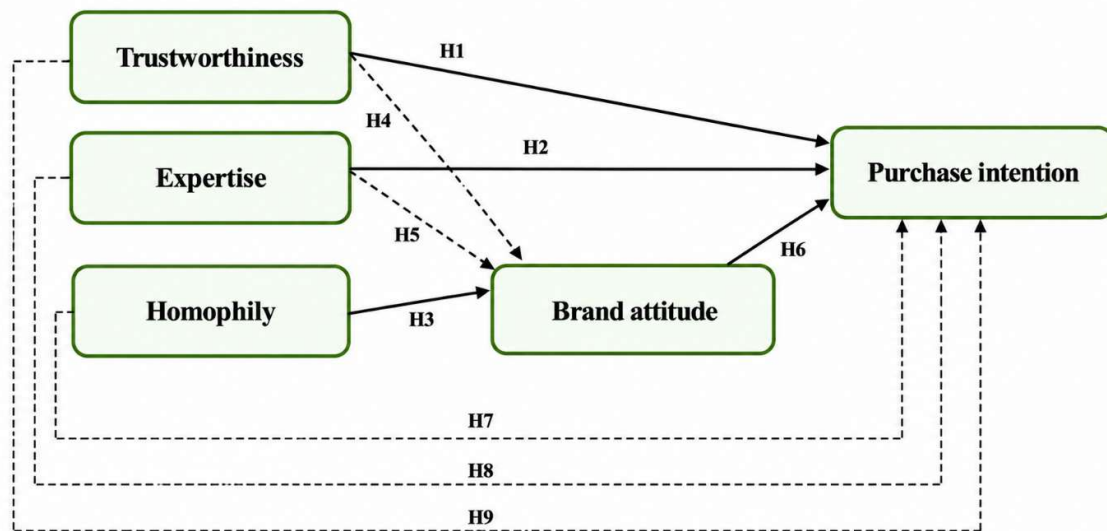


Figure 1: Research framework

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional survey approach to gather empirical data. Cross-sectional surveys are extensively utilized in consumer research to capture perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and behavioural tendencies at a specific point in time (Mabkhot et al., 2022). All measurement items were either adopted or adapted from established scales validated in previous scholarly works. Specifically, influencer trustworthiness was measured using five items adapted from Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim (2020), influencer expertise was measured using five items adapted from Rebelo (2017), influencer homophily was measured using five items adapted from Kusumasondjaja (2015), brand attitude was measured using four items adapted from Kudeshia and Kumar (2017), and

purchase intention was measured using four items adapted from Laohasukkasem et al. (2021). The primary objective of this study was to examine the effect of social media influencers' characteristics and brand attitude on consumers' purchase intentions within the context of casual dining restaurants in Saudi Arabia. To test the hypothesized relationships among the study constructs, PLS-SEM version 4.1 was applied as the primary analytical technique, aligned with the proposed theoretical framework.

The survey instrument was structured into two main sections. The first section collected respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, educational attainment, and income level. The second section focused on assessing the key constructs of the research model, with each construct measured through multiple reflective items. Regarding the measurement scales, a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was employed to evaluate the independent and mediating variables. The dependent variable was measured using a seven-point Likert scale anchored from "very unlikely" to "very likely." The use of distinct scale anchors for different constructs was intended to reduce the potential for common method bias, as recommended by (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

The survey instrument was initially developed in English based on well-established scales from prior research and subsequently translated into Arabic using the back-translation method recommended by (Brislin, 1970) to ensure both linguistic and conceptual equivalence. Presenting the questionnaire in Arabic aimed to enhance participants' comprehension and comfort, thereby improving response accuracy. This decision was particularly important because English is not the respondents' primary language; using Arabic ensured that participants could fully understand the questionnaire items and respond more precisely.

Data collection was conducted using an online survey created through Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Facebook, targeting consumers who are regular users of social networks. Two screening questions were included at the beginning of the survey to determine respondents' eligibility to participate in the study. The first question asked: "Do you actively use social media platforms at least once a week?". The second screening question asked: "Have you dined at a casual dining restaurant in the past three months?". The inclusion of respondents with prior casual dining experience was intended to ensure familiarity with the restaurant context. Accordingly, the study focuses on consumers' initial purchase intention toward influencer-endorsed casual dining restaurant. Only participants who answered "yes" to both screening questions were permitted to proceed with the full questionnaire, while those who did not qualify were automatically excluded from further participation. The online survey was administered between September and October 2025.

The target population for this study comprised social media users in Saudi Arabia with prior casual dining restaurant experience. Given the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for this population, a non-probability sampling approach was adopted, which is appropriate in contexts where the full list of potential respondents cannot be precisely determined (Ramayah et al., 2010). Specifically, purposive sampling was employed to ensure the relevance and validity of the sample by focusing on participants who met the predefined selection criteria. This approach is widely recommended when the research objective requires respondents with specific characteristics pertinent to the study context (Rowley, 2014).

The minimum required sample size for this study was determined using G*Power version 3.1. The calculation employed an F-test with an error probability of 0.05, a statistical power of 0.80, and a moderate effect size of 0.15. Given these parameters and the inclusion of four predictors, the minimum recommended sample size was 85 respondents (Alotaibi & Roussinov, 2016). Although PLS-SEM can yield valid results with relatively small samples, larger sample sizes enhance the reliability and generalizability of findings (Hair & Alamer,

2022). Accordingly, the survey was distributed to a sample exceeding the minimum requirement to ensure robust data for analysis.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Common Method Bias Assessment

In survey-based research, common method bias (CMB) poses a potential threat, as it may artificially inflate or deflate the observed relationships among constructs. To mitigate this concern, this study implemented both procedural and statistical safeguards in line with established methodological recommendations by (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Procedurally, different response formats (distinct headers) was used for the dependent variable to minimize CMB (Halimi et al., 2022; Ngah, Thurasamy, & Han, 2023). Statistically, a full collinearity assessment was conducted in accordance with Kock (2015) to evaluate multicollinearity among constructs. Variance inflated factor VIF values were computed for all constructs, and as reported in Table 1, these values ranged from 1.087 to 1.783, all well below the conservative threshold of 3.3 (Kock, 2015). This provides strong evidence that multicollinearity is not a problematic issue in the current model.

Table 1: Full collinearity analysis

Constructs	TR	EX	HM	BA	PI
VIF	1.278	1.127	1.087	1.758	1.783

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

This study adopted the two-step analytical procedure proposed by (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hair et al., 2019), comprising sequential evaluation of the measurement model followed by the structural model. The measurement model assessment focused on examining construct reliability and validity, with model adequacy established upon satisfactory confirmation of convergent and discriminant validity criteria (Hair et al., 2017; Handranata & Kalila, 2025; Ngah, Thurasamy, & Han, 2023). Convergent validity verifies that indicators within a specific construct accurately measure their intended theoretical domain, whereas discriminant validity establishes that each construct maintains distinctiveness from other constructs in the research framework (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; J. Hair et al., 2017).

4.2.1 Convergent Validity

Convergent validity denotes the degree to which measurement indicators accurately reflect their corresponding latent construct and correlate appropriately with alternative measures of the same theoretical concept (Hair, 2014). Established criteria for confirming convergent validity require factor loadings of 0.70 or above, average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding 0.5, and composite reliability (CR) coefficients attaining a minimum threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). As evidenced in Table 2, all AVE and CR values surpassed their respective threshold criteria, thereby substantiating adequate convergent validity within the measurement model. These findings demonstrate that all measurement indicators and latent constructs exhibit satisfactory validity and reliability, thus providing a robust foundation for subsequent structural model assessment.

Table 2: Convergent validity

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
TR	TR1	0.882	0.944	0.770
	TR2	0.838		
	TR3	0.911		
	TR4	0.893		
	TR5	0.862		
EX	EX1	0.882	0.938	0.751
	EX2	0.891		
	EX3	0.855		
	EX4	0.821		
	EX5	0.882		
HM	HM1	0.813	0.932	0.732
	HM2	0.793		
	HM3	0.896		
	HM4	0.880		
	HM5	0.890		
BA	BA1	0.880	0.922	0.746
	BA2	0.837		
	BA3	0.877		
	BA4	0.861		
PI	PI1	0.873	0.928	0.764
	PI2	0.895		
	PI3	0.881		
	PI4	0.847		

4.2.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity assessment constitutes the second evaluation criterion at the measurement model, ensuring that each construct remains distinct and captures unique phenomena not represented by other constructs within the research model (Hair et al., 2017). Following the recommendation of the recent literature by (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019), the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio was employed as the discriminant validity criterion. HTMT values exceeding 0.9 signify problematic discriminant validity concerns (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019). As demonstrated in Table 3, discriminant validity was satisfactorily established, with all HTMT ratios falling below the conservative threshold proposed by (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019), thereby confirming that each construct maintains adequate empirical distinction from others in the measurement model.

Table 3: Discriminant validity (HTMT)

Construct	BA	EX	HM	PI	TR
BA					
EX	0.309				
HM	0.295	0.061			
PI	0.672	0.279	0.105		
TR	0.369	0.042	0.115	0.473	

4.3 Structural Model Assessment

Following the successful establishment of the measurement model, the structural model assessment was undertaken to evaluate the predictive capacity of the research framework for target constructs (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Hypothesis testing employed the PLS technique with bootstrapping procedures for inner model testing, utilizing 10,000 bootstrap samples as recommended by (Becker et al., 2023). Path coefficients were evaluated based on standardized beta values, which must align with hypothesized directional relationships and satisfy statistical significance thresholds ($P < 0.05$, t -statistics ≥ 1.645). Additionally, confidence intervals were examined to ensure they excluded zero values, while variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics confirmed the absence of multicollinearity concerns (Hwang et al., 2011; Ngah et al., 2019). The structural model analysis yielded support for six direct hypothesized relationships (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H7), while one direct hypothesis (H6) was found to be unsupported. As shown in Table 4, the supported paths include: $TR \rightarrow BA$ ($\beta = 0.315$, t -value = 6.691), $TR \rightarrow PI$ ($\beta = 0.275$, t -value = 6.347), $EX \rightarrow BA$ ($\beta = 0.277$, t -value = 5.837), $EX \rightarrow PI$ ($\beta = 0.116$, t -value = 2.785), $HM \rightarrow BA$ ($\beta = 0.223$, t -value = 4.617), $BA \rightarrow PI$ ($\beta = 0.494$, t -value = 11.452).

For the mediation analysis, the procedure recommended by (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was applied, which involves bootstrapping the sampling distribution of the indirect effect. Consistent with this approach, mediation was assessed using bias-corrected confidence intervals obtained from bootstrapping, as suggested by (Hair et al., 2017). The indirect effects were considered supported based on the beta coefficients, t -statistics, p -values, and confidence intervals that exclude zero. The results indicate that brand attitude exerts a positive mediating effect on the relationship between TR and PI ($\beta = 0.155$, $t = 5.791$, $p \leq 0.01$, LL = 0.113, UL = 0.202), thereby supporting H8. Similarly, brand attitude positively mediates the relationship between EX and PI ($\beta = 0.137$, $t = 4.987$, $p \leq 0.01$, LL = 0.093, UL = 0.184), providing support for H9. Finally, brand attitude also positively mediates the relationship between HM and PI ($\beta = 0.110$, $t = 4.174$, $p \leq 0.01$, LL = 0.068, UL = 0.155), thus confirming H10. Table 4 provide summary of the results.

Table 4: Structural model hypothesis testing

Hypot hesis	Relationsh ip	Beta	Std Error	T- value	P value	LLCI	ULCI	Decision
H1	TR -> BA	0.315	0.047	6.691	0.000	0.236	0.390	Supported
H2	TR -> PI	0.275	0.043	6.347	0.000	0.201	0.344	Supported
H3	EX -> BA	0.277	0.048	5.837	0.000	0.196	0.352	Supported
H4	EX -> PI	0.116	0.042	2.785	0.003	0.047	0.184	Supported
H5	HM -> BA	0.223	0.048	4.617	0.000	0.139	0.298	Supported
H6	HM -> PI	-0.070	0.043	1.618	0.053	-0.142	-0.001	Unsupport ed
H7	BA -> PI	0.494	0.043	11.452	0.000	0.423	0.565	Supported

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	Std Error	T-value	P values	LLCI	ULLCI	Decision
H8	TR -> BA -> PI	0.155	0.027	5.791	0.000	0.113	0.202	Supported
H9	EX -> BA -> PI	0.137	0.027	4.987	0.000	0.093	0.184	Supported
H10	HM -> BA -> PI	0.110	0.026	4.174	0.000	0.068	0.155	Supported

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study tested ten hypotheses. The primary objective was to examine the effect of influencer marketing on consumers' purchase intentions in casual dining restaurants in Saudi Arabia and, to investigate the mediating role of brand attitude in the relationships between influencer attributes and purchase intention. By employing the SOR framework, this study examines the key influencer attributes that shape consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitude in this context.

The results support H2 and H4, showing that influencer trustworthiness and expertise have a positive, direct, and significant effect on purchase intention. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that trustworthy and expert influencers enhance consumers' intentions to purchase (Aggad & Sh, 2021; AlFarraj et al., 2021; Al-Muani et al., 2023; Lefina & Hidayat, 2022; Park & Lin, 2020; Shan et al., 2018).

In addition, the findings confirm that trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily positively, directly and substantially influence brand attitude (H1, H3, H5). These results indicate that these specific influencer attributes are critical in shaping consumers' attitudes toward the promoted brands, which in turn affect their willingness to purchase the advertised products or services. This is in line with prior studies that have reported positive effects of influencer trustworthiness, expertise, and homophily on brand attitude (Abdulaziz et al., 2024; Bu et al., 2022; Hmoud et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2021; Regina & Anindita, 2022), which confirm that, for consumers in Saudi Arabia, influencer endorsements are a critical factor in fostering positive attitudes toward casual dining restaurants. Thus, partnering with influencers who are perceived as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and relatable is essential for this industry. Given that dining experiences are often selected to satisfy social, hedonic, and experiential needs, choosing influencers who resonate with the target audience's lifestyle and preferences can strengthen the impact of influencer endorsement on shaping positive brand attitudes and enhancing the purchase intention among Saudi consumers in the casual dining segment.

In addition, the study revealed that brand attitude has a positive effect on purchase intention, supporting H7. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that attitude is positively associated with purchase intention (Chetioui et al., 2020; Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Sallam & Wahid, 2012). Consumers who hold favourable attitudes toward a restaurant are more likely to visit that restaurant. A plausible explanation is that once customers form a positive evaluation of a business, they develop a stronger intention to try its offerings and

purchase from it. In the restaurant context, consumers tend to be selective and risk-averse, as trying a new restaurant can lead to dissatisfaction or even discomfort, particularly in terms of digestive convenience. Consequently, customers are more inclined to form strong purchase intentions toward restaurants for which they already hold favourable brand attitudes.

In order to further enhance the contribution of this study, brand attitude was examined as a mediating variable. The analysis shows that brand attitude mediates the relationships between influencer attributes and purchase intention, supporting H8, H9, and H10. In other words, a positive brand attitude provides a mediating pathway through which influencer attributes lead casual dining restaurant customers to develop stronger purchase intentions. This finding is consistent with the SOR framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which posits that, environmental stimuli (influencer attributes) influence cognitive and affective evaluations (brand attitude), which in turn shape behavioural responses (purchase intention). Thus, casual dining restaurants should not overlook the role of brand attitude and the other independent variables if they wish to enhance the effectiveness of their marketing efforts and support long-term sustainability and success.

6.0 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The present study advances the limited body of knowledge on purchase intention within the casual dining restaurant sector in Saudi Arabia, a context that has received scant empirical attention compared to developed economies and other industries while also responding to recent systematic review calls (Kumar et al., 2024) for more empirical evidence from developing economies. By conceptualising influencer attributes as stimuli, brand attitude as the organism, and purchase intention as the response, this research proposes and validates a novel SOR-based framework tailored to Saudi casual dining consumers. In doing so, it extends the explanatory power of the SOR paradigm for predicting consumers' behavioural responses and purchase intentions toward casual dining restaurants in this underexplored market.

Furthermore, the study empirically examines the mediating role of brand attitude in the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention. This directly addresses the gap highlighted by (Joshi et al., 2025), who note that extant influencer marketing research tends to focus on direct effects on consumer behaviour and call for greater attention to the underlying psychological mechanisms. By demonstrating the attitudinal pathway through which influencer characteristics shape purchase decisions, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of the process by which influencer marketing drives consumer responses in the Saudi casual dining context.

7.0 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study offers several practical implications for marketers, businesses, and influencers operating in the social media marketing ecosystem. As businesses continue to increase budgets for influencer campaigns and seek more effective criteria for selecting suitable partners, they face a persistent information deficit regarding which influencers are most appropriate for their brands, products, or services (Eyal, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2021). Although social media platforms provide basic user data and facilitate influencer search, the available information is typically limited to demographic indicators and quantitative metrics (Kim & Kim, 2021), offering little guidance on the psychological levers that drive consumer response.

The present study identified nuanced influencer attributes (expertise, trustworthiness, and homophily) as critical criteria for influencer selection and campaign design. For marketers and businesses, understanding how these characteristics shape brand attitude and purchase intention can inform the development of more effective influencer marketing strategies. By prioritising influencers who are perceived as knowledgeable, honest, and similar to their target

audience, firms can increase the likelihood that consumers adopt influencers' recommendations, thereby enhancing brand attitudes and strengthening purchase intentions. businesses should also encourage influencers to provide honest, well-informed, high-quality, and relevant content, as such content further reinforces positive brand evaluations and buying intentions.

For influencers, the results underscore the importance of cultivating credibility and relational closeness with followers. Building trust, demonstrating domain-specific expertise, and signalling meaningful similarity to the audience can enhance engagement and persuasive impact. By focusing on these dimensions, influencers can create more compelling content, improve their ability to shape consumers' attitudes toward promoted brands, and more effectively drive purchasing decisions.

8.0 STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study offers important contributions, it is not free from limitations. This study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the sample comprised predominantly casual dining restaurant consumers in Saudi Arabia recruited using purposive sampling, which constrains the generalisability of the findings to other national contexts and market settings. In line with the view that consumer behaviour is shaped by national culture (Lim et al., 2021), future research should replicate this study across different countries, business types, and industries to generate deeper insights and generalisability of the results. Second, the cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to observe changes in purchase intention and preferred influencer attributes over time. The exclusive reliance on a quantitative design from the user's perspective may further narrow the interpretive depth of the findings. Longitudinal research, complemented by alternative approaches such as qualitative or mixed-method designs, could offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics underlying influencer marketing effects and consumer decision processes. Additionally, this study examined social media in a general sense rather than focusing on specific platforms. Future studies could investigate how influencer marketing on particular platforms (e.g., TikTok or Instagram) shapes consumer behaviour, thereby unpacking platform-specific mechanisms and strategies. In addition, the sample size and its composition limit the generalizability of the findings and may introduce sampling error. The final sample comprises 343 consumers of casual dining restaurants in Saudi Arabia, which may not be fully representative of consumers in other regions, patrons of other types of restaurants, or customers in different industries. Consequently, caution is warranted when generalising these findings beyond the specific context examined. Future studies may encompass a wider and more diverse array of participants across regions, restaurant formats, and sectors to yield more comprehensive and generalisable insights.

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