

INFLUENCER MARKETING AND PURCHASE INTENTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TRUST

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ABSTRACT

Background: Digitalization had transformed consumption patterns, positioning influencer marketing as a dominant strategy in contemporary business. Social media influencers significantly enhanced brand awareness and purchase intention, particularly among students as active technology users. However, their impact was mediated by trust, which strengthened consumer responses to marketing messages. Thus, examining trust as a mediating variable between influencer marketing, brand awareness, and purchase intention was essential to advance marketing knowledge within the student market segment.

Purpose: This study aims to examine the influence of influencer marketing on brand awareness and purchase intention, emphasizing the mediating role of trust. While influencer marketing is recognized as a driver of consumer decisions, its impact is often indirect, shaped by consumer trust. Prior studies have overlooked this mediating factor, particularly within the student market segment. Addressing this gap, the research provides new insights into digital marketing by highlighting trust as a critical determinant of effectiveness.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study employed a quantitative research design at Tadulako University, Palu, Indonesia, from February to October 2024. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 86 postgraduate students, determined via the Slovin formula from a population of 630. The instrument, validated by expert review and pilot testing, used a five-point Likert scale. Data analysis utilized descriptive statistics and path analysis with SmartPLS 4 to examine causal relationships and ensure validity and reliability.

Finding/Result: The results demonstrate that influencer marketing significantly enhances brand awareness, purchase intention, and trust among students. Trust itself positively influences both brand awareness and purchase intention, while also serving as a significant mediator between influencer marketing and these outcomes. Path analysis confirms all hypotheses, underscoring the central role of trust in strengthening consumer perceptions and decisions. These findings highlight that influencer marketing effectiveness depends not only on brand exposure but also on building sustainable trust-based relationships.

Conclusion: This study concludes that influencer marketing significantly enhances brand awareness and purchase intention among graduate students, with trust acting as a pivotal mediating factor. Trust reduces perceived risks and reinforces consumer confidence, thereby amplifying marketing effectiveness. The study contributes novel insights by positioning trust as a central mechanism in digital marketing strategies. However, due to the limited sample size, findings should be interpreted cautiously and further validated across broader contexts and product categories.

Originality/State of the art: This research contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the mediating role of trust in influencer marketing's effects on graduate students, providing insights for marketers targeting this demographic in the context of mobile phone purchases.

Keywords: influencer marketing, brand awareness, purchase intention, consumer decisions, digital marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Social media and social networking have dramatically changed the way people get information and news. Hruska & Maresova (2020) stated that individuals with high household income and higher education levels in the United States are highly dependent on social media usage. The dependence of young people on social media fosters their ability to navigate information critically and with greater awareness (Swart, 2023). The use of and dependence on social media extend beyond young people to all groups, significantly shaping users' everyday behaviors (Koçak et al. 2021). This has the consequence that the need to search for information from social media and from fellow consumers has become more urgent than ever, data from Twitter and Annalect revealed that almost 40% of Twitter users involved in the survey said they bought something because of an influencer's tweet (Karp, 2016).

The advancement of digitalization has transformed consumption patterns across diverse groups. In modern marketing, effectiveness is also determined by marketing communication through influencers and interactive activities that stimulate customer motivation (Mawaddah et al. 2025; Ryndian Gusty et al. 2025). Influencer marketing has become the most dominant marketing strategy in digital business in recent years (Leung et al. 2022). Influencer engagement and influence have recently become the digital consumer standard for increasing brand awareness and purchase intent (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Influencer marketing involves individuals on social media in decision making (Martínez-López et al. 2020). Social media influencers are online/digital personalities who have a large following on one or more social media platforms (YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or blogs), who have an influence on their followers. Unlike celebrities or public figures who are mostly known through traditional media, social media influencers are "ordinary people" who have become famous online celebrities through what they create and post on social media (Hudders et al. 2021). Influencers generally have expertise in a particular field such as food, nightlife, lifestyle, beauty or fashion. Influencer marketing, accompanied by product quality, has a significant and positive impact on purchase decisions and consumer satisfaction (Hasan et al. 2025). Based on Chan et al. (2023) findings, the global market value of influencer marketing is projected to reach USD 21.1 billion by 2025, indicating its rapid growth and relevance in

contemporary marketing strategies. A recent Twitter study showed that consumers can give the same level of trust to social media influencers as they do to their friends (Singh et al. 2020).

Mobile phones have become a necessity for almost all groups in society including students. The use of mobile phones by students in addition to being a means of communication includes: accessing the internet, interacting on social media, lecture needs, and others (Sobaih et al. 2020). According to the study, students use most of 62.5% for interaction needs on social media and browsing the internet, while the other half (40.63%) use mobile phones to listen to music (Lestari & Yarmi, 2017). This indicates that students as active users of communication technology make students one of the potential segments of the mobile phone market and in their daily activities are very close to the influence of internet marketing, especially influencer marketing (Roblek et al. 2019). In decision making, Brand awareness is an important factor especially in mobile phone marketing (Brabo et al. 2021). Brand awareness is the first stage in a consumer's journey towards a purchasing decision (Ardiansyah & Sarwoko, 2020). Brands that have an impression and are easy to remember will have competitive value in consumer decisions (Sari Dewi et al. 2020). Consumers who have high brand awareness will involve the brand as part of the consideration when deciding on a purchase. Brand awareness is the foundation in building brand equity. In addition, in making decisions in purchasing mobile phones, consumers also tend to involve other factors such as trust (Maulana & Marista, 2021).

Influencer marketing is a link between brand awareness and the decision whether consumers will buy or not, but its influence is indirect (Ali & Alquda, 2022). This is due to another marketing factor, namely trust as a key element (Popova et al. 2019). Trust is a key element that strengthens the relationship between influencers and potential consumers, so it can affect how effectively marketing messages are received and translated into purchase intentions (Chetoui et al. 2020). Although there are many studies examining the influence of influencer marketing, most of them have not explicitly investigated the role of trust as a mediating variable that links influencer marketing to marketing outcomes such as brand awareness and purchase intention. Therefore, it is very important to investigate the influence of influencer marketing on brand awareness and purchase intention through

the mediation of trust variables in the student market segment. An in-depth study related to how the student market segment responds to influencer marketing to recognize (brand awareness) and grow the desire to buy (purchase intention), is important to continue to be carried out in various consumer segments. The findings are expected to enrich marketing science by providing a novel perspective on the development of internet marketing concepts, emphasizing the mediating role of trust in influencer marketing within the student market segment.

METHODS

This research was conducted at Tadulako University, Jl. Soekarno Hatta No.KM. 9, Tondo, Mantikulore, Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. This research took place from February to October 2024. This study primarily used quantitative data, which focused on numerical measurements to identify and analyze relationships between variables. The sources of data are: (1) Primary Data: This data is directly collected from respondents, specifically postgraduate students of Tadulako University, through a structured questionnaire or survey; (2) Secondary Data: Data from existing literature or previous studies.

The data collection technique employed in this study was survey. This method was suitable for gathering quantitative data from a large sample of participants. The survey included questions designed to capture information regarding the respondents' gender, age, occupation, and other variables relevant to the research. Table 1 is a comparative table of respondent characteristics based on gender, age and occupation. The population in this study were all active postgraduate students of Tadulako University with a total of 630 people. With a sample size of 86 students. Determination of the number of samples based on the Slovin formula as follows:

$$n = N/N \cdot e^2 + 1 = 630/(630) \cdot (0,1)^2 + 1 = 86$$

Description: n (Number of Samples); N (Number of Populations); e (Tolerable Margin of Error).

Data analysis was conducted using two main techniques. First, descriptive statistical analysis was applied to summarize the main features of the data, including the frequency, percentage, and distribution

of respondents based on gender, age, and occupation. Second, inferential statistical analysis (path analysis) was employed to test the relationships among the studied variables. The analysis was performed using SmartPLS 4 software, which was appropriate for structural equation modeling (SEM) and path analysis. By employing these techniques, this study aims to explain cause-effect relationships among the variables and ensure that the results are statistically valid and reliable.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire designed based on established constructs from prior studies. Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Content validity was ensured through expert judgment, while a pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted to assess clarity and reliability. The final questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The sample was drawn from a population of 630 active postgraduate students at Tadulako University. Using the Slovin formula with a 10% margin of error, the minimum required sample size was 86 respondents, which was deemed sufficient to represent the population while balancing feasibility. This justification ensures that the sample size is both statistically appropriate and practically manageable.

Convergent validity evaluation is carried out by looking at the loading factor value. The Loading factor value is a quantity that shows the relationship between the construct and its indicators. The convergent validity value is declared valid if the outer loading value is above 0.50 (Yusoff et al. 2020). After processing using the SmartPLS 4.0 application, the results of the loading factor calculations can be observed in the Table 2.

The Table 2 shows that all indicators have a loading factor value above 0.5. Indicators that have a loading factor value above 0.5 are declared to have high validity so that they meet the requirements of convergent validity. Evaluation of discriminant validity is carried out by comparing the root value of the Average Variance Extract (AVE) with the correlation between constructs. Variables are considered to meet discriminant validity if the root value of AVE is higher than the correlation of the constructs (Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). A good AVE is required to have a value of more than 0.5. The Table 3 shows the AVE and square root values of AVE for each construct in this study.

The SmartPLS 4.0 output results for the composite reliability value are depicted in the following Table 4. The table shows that the AVE value for each construct has met the requirements, which is more than 0.5. A construct is declared reliable if it has a composite reliability value > 0.7 .

Based on the results of the analysis, it is known that the composite reliability value for all constructs exceeds 0.7. Therefore, all constructs are stated to have good reliability according to the minimum required limit. Analysis of variance (R²) or determination test is carried out to determine the magnitude of the correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The value of the determination

coefficient based on the results of the analysis using Smart PLS 4.0 can be observed in the Table 5.

From the results of the analysis as shown in the table above, it is known that Brand awareness is able to explain the variability of the Trust and Influencer Marketing constructs by 57.1%, the remaining 42.9% is explained by other constructs not examined in this study. In addition, the results of the analysis also show that Purchase Intention is able to explain the Trust and influencer marketing constructs by 50.7%. Furthermore, the results of the analysis also show that Trust is able to explain the variability of the Influencer Marketing construct by 50.2%.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics based on gender, age and occupation

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Male	35	41%
Female	51	59%
Age		
21-25 years	13	15%
26-30 years	60	70%
31-35 years	9	10%
Over 36 years	4	5%"

Variable	n	%
Occupation		
Student	35	41%
Housewife	3	4%
Civil Servant	25	30%
Teacher	8	8%
Consultant	2	3%
Private Employee	8	8%
Tutor	4	5%
Driver	1	1%

Table 2. Loading factor values

	X1.	Y.	Z.1.	Z.2.
X1.2	0.834			
X1.3	0.763			
X1.4	0.833			
X1.5	0.798			
X1.6	0.812			
Y.1		0.788		
Y.2		0.825		
Y.3		0.877		

	X1.	Y.	Z.1.	Z.2.
Z.1.1			0.834	
Z.1.2			0.887	
Z.1.3			0.875	
Z.1.4			0.845	
Z.2.1				0.861
Z.2.2				0.843
Z.2.3				0.878
Z.2.4				0.860

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) Value

Variables	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Awareness	0.740
Influencer Marketing	0.653
Purchase Intention	0.741
Trust	0.690

Thus, the research hypothesis framework can be described in Figure 1. Based on the hypothesis framework, the hypotheses proposed in this study are as follows:

- H1: Influencer marketing has a significant effect on students' brand awareness.
- H2: Influencer marketing has a significant effect on students' Purchase intention.
- H3: Influencer marketing has a significant effect on trust.
- H4: Trust has a significant effect on students' brand awareness.
- H5: Trust has a significant effect on students' Purchase intention.
- H6: Trust significantly mediates the effect of influencer marketing on brand awareness.
- H7: Trust significantly mediates the effect of influencer marketing on purchase intention.

RESULTS

Hypothesis testing is carried out based on the results of the inner model test (structural model), including the R-square output, parameter coefficients, and t-statistics. The structural model of this study is described in Figure 2. Furthermore, the results of the path coefficients in this study are described in the following Table 6.

Table 4. Composite reliability value

Variables	Composite Reability Value
Brand Awareness	0.919
Influencer Marketing	0.904
Purchase Intention	0.919
Trust	0.870

Table 5. R-square value

Variables	R-square	Adjusted R-square
Brand Awareness	0.571	0.561
Purchase Intention	0.507	0.495
Trust	0.502	0.496

Table 6. Path coefficients results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Influencer Marketing → Brand Awareness	0.564	0.564	0.107	5.291	0.000
Influencer Marketing → Purchase Intention	0.354	0.396	0.132	2.686	0.007
Influencer Marketing → Trust	0.708	0.706	0.065	10.840	0.000
Trust → Brand Awareness	0.243	0.240	0.116	2.087	0.037
Trust → Purchase Intention	0.416	0.402	0.129	3.225	0.001

Thus, the hypothesis test (direct effect) shows:

H1: Influencer marketing has a significant effect on students' brand awareness.

The test results show a t-statistic value of 5.291 and a P value of 0.000. From these results, the t-statistic is significant, because the t-statistic > 1.66 with a P value > 0.05 so that the first hypothesis is accepted. This proves that Influencer Marketing has an influence on Brand Awareness. This is in line with the findings of Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández (2019), influencer engagement and influence have recently become the digital consumer standard for increasing brand awareness and purchase intent.

H2: Influencer marketing has a significant effect on students' Purchase intention.

The test results show a t-statistic value of 2.686 and a P value of 0.007. From these results, the t-statistic is significant, because the t-statistic > 1.66 with a P value > 0.05 so that the second hypothesis is accepted. This proves that Influencer Marketing has an influence on Purchase Intention. This supports the conclusions drawn by Saad et al. (2025).

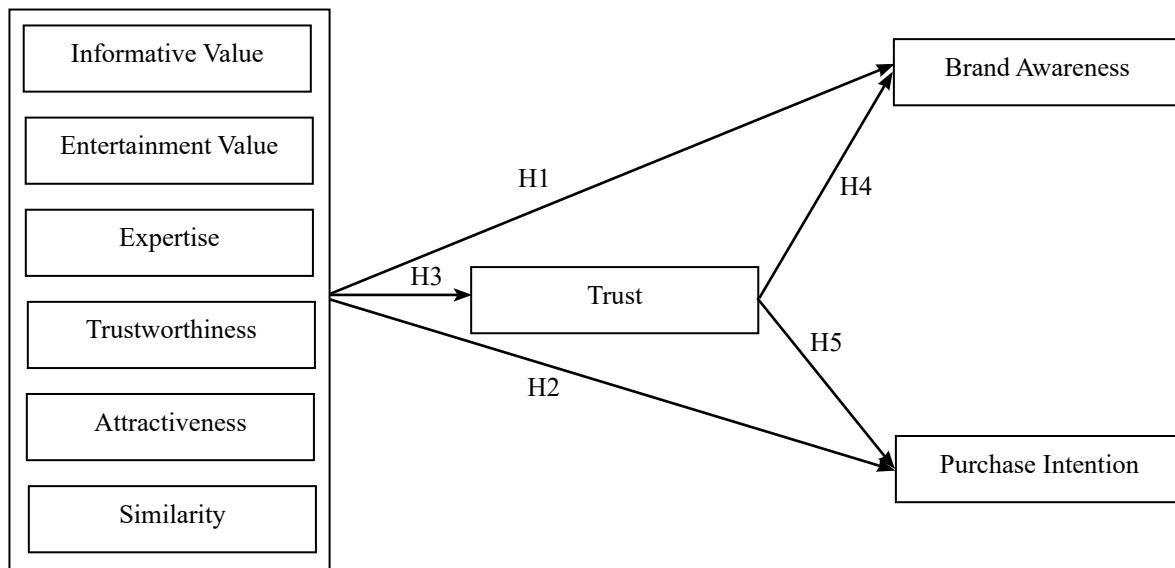


Figure 1. Research hypothesis framework

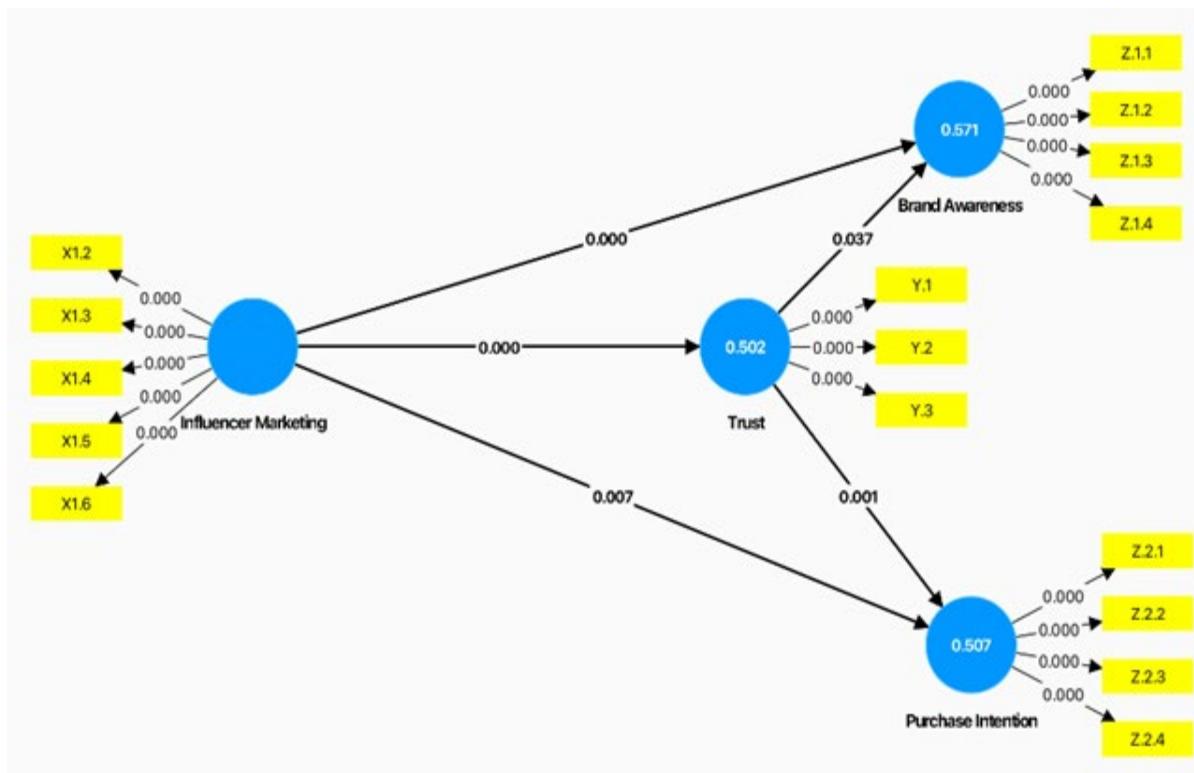


Figure 2. Bootstrapping model

H3: Influencer marketing has a significant effect on trust.

The test results show a t-statistic value of 10.840 and a P value of 0.000. From these results, the t-statistic is significant, because the $t\text{-statistic} > 1.66$ with a P value > 0.05 so that the third hypothesis is accepted. This proves

that Influencer Marketing has an influence on Trust. Trust is a key element that strengthens the relationship between influencers and potential consumers, so it can affect how effectively marketing messages are received and translated into purchase intentions (Chetioui et al. 2020).

H4: Trust has a significant effect on student brand awareness.

The test results show a t-statistic value of 2.087 and a P value of 0.037. From these results, the t-statistic is significant, because the t-statistic > 1.66 with a P value > 0.05 so that the fourth hypothesis is accepted. This proves that Trust has an influence on Brand Awareness. Influencer marketing is a link between brand awareness and the decision whether consumers will buy or not, but its influence is indirect (Ali & Alquda, 2022).

H5: Trust has a significant effect on student Purchase intention.

The test results show a t-statistic value of 3.225 and a P value of 0.001. From these results, the t-statistic is significant, because the t-statistic is > 1.66 with a P value > 0.05 so that the fifth hypothesis is accepted. This proves that Trust has an influence on Purchase Intention in line with the findings of M. Arpah et al. (2023).

Meanwhile, based on hypothesis testing (indirect influence) shows on Table 7:

H6: Trust significantly mediates the influence of influencer marketing on brand awareness

The test results show a t-statistic value of 1.986 and a P value of 0.047. From these results, the t-statistic is significant, because the t-statistic is > 1.66 with a P value > 0.05 so that the fifth hypothesis is accepted. This proves that Trust mediates the influence of Influencer Marketing on Brand Awareness.

H7: Trust significantly mediates the influence of influencer marketing on purchase intention

The test results show a t-statistic value of 3.108 and a P value of 0.002. From these results, it is stated that the t-statistic is significant, because the t-statistic is > 1.66 with a P value > 0.05 so that the fifth hypothesis is

accepted. This proves that Trust mediates the influence of Influencer Marketing on Purchase Intention.

Influencer Marketing Significantly Influences Brand Awareness

The findings demonstrate that influencer marketing significantly enhances brand awareness among students. Respondents reported that greater recognition of mobile phone brands are frequently promoted by influencers. This aligns with Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández (2019), who emphasize that consistent influencer engagement has become a standard mechanism for strengthening consumer awareness. Similarly, Leung et al. (2022) argue that social media influencers function as opinion leaders whose repetitive exposure increases brand recall. However, compared to traditional advertising, influencer-driven awareness relies more heavily on perceived authenticity and relevance of content (Hudders et al. 2021), which explains why students easily remember brands endorsed by influencers they trust.

Influencer Marketing Significantly Influences Purchase Intention

This study confirms that influencer marketing positively shapes purchase intention, as students perceive influencer-generated content particularly reviews and demonstrations as useful in decision-making. This result corroborates Saad et al. (2025), who found that influencer credibility strongly affects purchase decisions among university students in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Hasan et al. (2025) emphasize that influencer marketing, when combined with product quality, leads to higher consumer satisfaction and stronger purchase intent. Nevertheless, our findings highlight that while influencers increase interest, final purchase decisions are still moderated by pragmatic factors such as price and personal needs, consistent with Martínez-López et al. (2020), who note that influencer marketing alone is insufficient to guarantee actual purchases.

Table 7. Path Coefficients Results (indirect effects)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Influencer Marketing → Brand Awareness	0.172	0.171	0.087	1.986	0.047
Influencer Marketing → Purchase Intention	0.295	0.283	0.095	3.108	0.002

Influencer Marketing Significantly Influences Trust

The findings demonstrate that influencer marketing fosters consumer trust, particularly when influencers exhibit authenticity, transparency, and consistent communication. This supports Chetioui et al. (2020), who identify credibility as a central factor in shaping consumer confidence, and Singh et al. (2020), who note that consumers may trust influencers as much as personal acquaintances. Extending these insights, this study shows that students' trust is shaped not only by expertise and content relevance but also by interactive engagement, such as responding to questions or providing feedback, which strengthens relational bonds. Such engagement positions influencers as relational partners rather than distant opinion leaders, fostering long-term trust. Importantly, this trust reduces perceived risks in online purchasing, enhances message credibility, and mediates the effectiveness of influencer marketing in translating brand exposure into stronger purchase intentions.

Trust Significantly Influences Brand Awareness

The findings reveal that trust plays a crucial role in strengthening brand awareness, reinforcing prior studies such as Ali & Alquda (2022), who emphasize its mediating function between influencer marketing and brand equity. When students perceive influencers as credible and authentic, they are more likely to recognize and recall promoted brands, which is consistent with Sari Dewi et al. (2020), who highlight the impact of trust on brand memorability. This study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that trust not only reinforces cognitive recognition through repetitive exposure but also creates a relational dimension, wherein brand awareness is shaped by perceptions of influencer integrity and consistency. Thus, trust operates as both a psychological and relational mechanism, amplifying the effectiveness of influencer-driven communication in embedding brands within consumers' evaluative and decision-making processes.

Trust Significantly Influences Purchase Intention

Trust emerges as a critical determinant of purchase intention. Respondents indicate that they are more likely to buy products endorsed by influencers they consider credible. This result is consistent with M. Arpah et al. (2023), who found that trust reduces

perceived risks in online purchasing, thereby strengthening intention to buy. Moreover, honest reviews and transparent communication by influencers are essential in mitigating uncertainty, which echoes findings by Hudders et al. (2021), regarding influencer authenticity. Our results highlight that while rational considerations such as price remain important, trust operates as a psychological enabler that facilitates decision-making.

The Mediating Role of Trust

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that trust significantly mediates the relationship between influencer marketing and both brand awareness and purchase intention. These results are consistent with Popova et al. (2019), who emphasize the centrality of trust in digital marketing effectiveness. However, unlike prior studies that often treat trust as a static factor, our findings suggest that trust is dynamically built through consistent exposure, authenticity, and interactive engagement. This insight provides a novel contribution, showing that the effectiveness of influencer marketing depends not merely on brand visibility but also on cultivating sustainable trust-based relationships.

Managerial Implications

In practical terms, the results of this study provide important guidance for marketing managers aiming to maximize the effectiveness of influencer marketing in enhancing brand awareness and purchase intention, particularly among university students. The findings confirm that students tend to recall and recognize mobile phone brands frequently promoted by influencers they follow on social media. Therefore, managers should prioritize collaborations with influencers who not only have substantial reach but also demonstrate strong engagement with the target demographic. Selecting influencers based on credibility, authenticity, and alignment with the product category is essential to ensure that marketing messages resonate effectively with younger consumers.

Beyond brand exposure, influencer marketing has been shown to directly influence purchase intention. To translate this potential into tangible sales outcomes, marketing managers should encourage influencers to deliver authentic product reviews, practical demonstrations, and transparent comparisons

that assist consumers in evaluating product value. Offering influencers access to exclusive product trials or early launches can enhance the credibility of their recommendations and foster stronger audience engagement. A key contribution of this study is the evidence that trust mediates the impact of influencer marketing on both brand awareness and purchase intention. For this reason, managers must develop campaigns that actively cultivate trust. This can be achieved through transparent disclosure of sponsorships, clear communication of both strengths and weaknesses of the product, and consistent interaction with consumers via Q&A sessions, live streams, or comment responses. Such practices strengthen consumer confidence and improve the perceived integrity of both influencers and brands.

Furthermore, sustainable influencer marketing requires moving beyond short-term promotional campaigns. Managers are encouraged to establish long-term partnerships with carefully selected influencers to ensure consistent messaging and ongoing credibility. This approach can create deeper consumer-brand relationships and reduce reliance on one-off promotions that may only yield temporary results. Companies should also monitor influencer performance using key performance indicators (KPIs) such as engagement rate, conversion rate, and sentiment analysis to evaluate campaign effectiveness and make necessary adjustments.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that influencer marketing significantly affects both brand awareness and purchase intention among graduate students, with trust serving as a crucial mediating factor. Specifically, influencers enhance brand recognition through consistent and relevant content, while trust strengthens these effects by reducing perceived risk and reinforcing confidence in purchase decisions. The novelty of this study lies in highlighting trust not merely as a complementary factor but as a pivotal mechanism that amplifies the impact of influencer marketing within the student market segment. However, given the limited sample size, these findings should be interpreted with caution and may not be fully generalizable beyond this context.

Recommendations

Mobile phone companies targeting graduate students are encouraged to employ influencer marketing strategies that emphasize trust-building, such as selecting credible influencers, ensuring transparency in communication, and fostering authentic engagement with audiences. Higher education institutions may also incorporate awareness of influencer marketing into digital literacy initiatives, enabling students to critically evaluate marketing content. Future research should broaden the scope by including diverse student populations across different institutions and examining other product categories to test the robustness and applicability of these findings in wider consumer contexts.

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