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Influencer Credibility, Brand Trust, and Impulsive Purchase Intention in Social Commerce: A Cross-Generational Investigation Across Emerging Markets

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Abstract

Social commerce platforms integrating peer recommendation, influencer content, and seamless in-app purchasing have fundamentally restructured consumer decision-making processes across emerging markets, where mobile-first internet adoption and youthful demographic profiles amplify the behavioral reach of influencer-mediated commerce. Despite rapid market growth, the mechanisms through which influencer credibility translates into brand trust, and subsequently into impulsive purchase intention, remain incompletely theorized and insufficiently tested across generational cohorts and cultural contexts in developing economies. This study develops and tests an integrated model grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Source Credibility Theory, and Stimulus-Organism-Response framework to examine how influencer expertise, trustworthiness, and parasocial relationship intensity shape brand trust and impulsive purchase intention among Generation Z and Millennial consumers in Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria. Drawing on survey data from 624 active social commerce users and employing covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) with multi-group analysis, the study finds that influencer trustworthiness exerts the strongest effect on brand trust (beta = 0.49, $p < 0.001$), which fully mediates the relationship between all influencer credibility dimensions and impulsive purchase intention. Parasocial relationship intensity significantly moderates the trustworthiness-brand trust relationship (beta = 0.26, $p < 0.01$). Generation Z consumers demonstrate significantly stronger parasocial relationship effects than Millennials, while cultural tightness-looseness moderates the relative weight of expertise versus trustworthiness pathways across the three national samples. The study contributes to social commerce, consumer behavior, and influencer marketing literatures and offers actionable recommendations for brand managers, platform operators, and marketing regulators in emerging market contexts.

Keywords: - Influencer Marketing, Social Commerce, Brand Trust, Impulsive Purchase Intention, Source Credibility Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Parasocial Relationships, Generation Z, Emerging Markets

I. INTRODUCTION

The convergence of social media, mobile commerce, and creator economy business models has produced a structurally novel commercial ecosystem in which individual content creators, commonly designated as influencers, serve as the primary trust intermediaries between brands and consumers (De Veirman et al., 2017). The global influencer marketing industry was estimated to exceed USD 21 billion in annual expenditure in 2023, with emerging markets in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa region accounting for a rapidly growing share of both investment and audience reach (Statista, 2024). In Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria, three of the most populous and youngest-demographic emerging economies globally, social media penetration rates have accelerated dramatically since 2018, with TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and local platforms such as Kwesé and Tokopedia Live hosting influencer-driven commerce ecosystems that increasingly blur the boundary between content consumption and retail transaction.

The commercial logic of influencer marketing rests on the proposition that consumers transfer trust from admired and credible individuals to the brands and products those individuals endorse, reducing the perceived risk of unfamiliar brand engagement and accelerating purchase decisions through parasocial identification mechanisms (Ohanian, 1990). This trust transfer is theorized to be particularly potent in social commerce environments, where peer-generated content, real-time interaction, and frictionless in-app purchasing combine to create conditions of heightened emotional engagement and reduced deliberative processing (Phan et al., 2020). However, the precise mechanisms through which influencer attributes, audience psychology, and platform architecture jointly determine downstream brand and purchase outcomes remain inadequately specified in the empirical literature, particularly for developing economy consumers navigating rapidly evolving digital retail environments.

Generational heterogeneity represents a theoretically important but empirically underexplored dimension of influencer marketing effectiveness. Generation Z consumers, broadly defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, represent the first truly digital-native generation and constitute the primary audience for short-form video and live commerce platforms in all three study countries (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Their consumption of social media content, including influencer-generated material, is characterized by higher duration, greater platform diversity, and stronger parasocial relationship formation than older cohort consumers, suggesting that influencer credibility mechanisms may operate with different intensity and through different pathways across generational groups. Comparative generational analysis of influencer marketing effectiveness has been limited in the academic literature and has been concentrated in advanced economy samples.

Cultural context further complicates the picture. Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural dimensions framework, and particularly the tightness-looseness dimension developed by Gelfand et al. (2011), predicts that consumers in tighter cultural environments characterized by strong social norms and lower tolerance for deviance may rely more heavily on influencer expertise signals as proxies for normative product selection, while consumers in looser cultural contexts may weight personal trustworthiness and relational authenticity more heavily. Testing these cultural moderation hypotheses across Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria, which vary meaningfully on tightness-looseness and other relevant cultural dimensions, provides an opportunity to advance the cross-cultural consumer behavior literature.

This study is organized around three research questions:

- Through what mechanisms do influencer expertise, trustworthiness, and parasocial relationship intensity influence brand trust and impulsive purchase intention among social commerce users in emerging markets?
- Do these mechanisms differ significantly across Generation Z and Millennial consumer cohorts?
- Does cultural tightness-looseness moderate the relative effectiveness of expertise versus trustworthiness pathways in the influencer-brand trust relationship?

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings. Section 5 discusses implications. Section 6 concludes with recommendations and limitations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Source Credibility Theory and Influencer Effectiveness

Source Credibility Theory, originally developed by Hovland et al. (1953) in the context of mass communication persuasion research, proposes that the persuasive effectiveness of a communication depends on the perceived credibility of the source, operationalized primarily through two dimensions: expertise (the extent to which the communicator is perceived as knowledgeable about the subject matter) and trustworthiness (the extent to which the communicator is perceived as honest and unbiased). Ohanian (1990) extended this framework to advertising contexts and added attractiveness as a third credibility dimension, validating a three-factor scale that has become the standard measurement instrument in source credibility research. Applied to influencer marketing, Source Credibility Theory predicts that influencers perceived as highly knowledgeable about their endorsed product categories and personally trustworthy in their recommendations will generate stronger attitudinal and behavioral effects on their audiences than less credible communicators. Empirical evidence broadly supports these predictions. Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrated that influencer informativeness and trustworthiness were the dominant predictors of follower purchase intention on Instagram, with expertise showing particularly strong effects in the beauty and fashion categories. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found through qualitative research that Instagram influencer effectiveness was primarily driven by perceived authenticity and relatability rather than celebrity status, suggesting that parasocial intimacy functions as a trust amplifier that interacts with formal credibility dimensions.

2.2. The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Social Commerce Processing

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), provides a complementary theoretical lens for understanding influencer marketing effectiveness. ELM distinguishes between the central route to persuasion, characterized by careful evaluation of argument quality and substantive content, and the peripheral route, characterized by reliance on heuristic cues including source attractiveness, social proof, and emotional appeals. The model predicts that motivation and ability to process information determine which route dominates in any given consumption context. Social commerce environments are characterized by conditions that systematically favor peripheral processing: high content volume, rapid scrolling consumption, ambient notification interruption, and the emotional activation generated by aspirational lifestyle content all reduce the cognitive resources available for central route evaluation (Xu et al., 2017). Under these conditions, influencer credibility cues function as peripheral heuristics that substitute for systematic product evaluation, enabling rapid trust transfer to endorsed brands. This theoretical prediction implies that influencer effectiveness in social

commerce may operate primarily through affect-laden trust and identification mechanisms rather than through deliberative attitude formation, with brand trust serving as the critical mediating construct.

2.3. Parasocial Relationships and Their Commercial Implications

Parasocial relationships, originally conceptualized by Horton and Wohl (1956) as the one-sided intimacy that media audiences develop toward performers they perceive as personally familiar, have attracted growing attention in the influencer marketing literature as a mechanism explaining the unusual persuasive effectiveness of social media creators relative to traditional celebrity endorsers. Unlike celebrity endorsement, which typically involves formal promotional contracts and clearly commercial intent, influencer content is embedded in ongoing personal narrative streams that create an illusion of genuine friendship and shared experience between creator and follower (Chapple and Cownie, 2017).

Empirical evidence links parasocial relationship intensity to enhanced influencer credibility perception, brand attitude transfer, and purchase behavior. Yuan and Lou (2020) demonstrated that parasocial relationship strength significantly amplified the effect of influencer trustworthiness on consumer brand attitude in a Chinese social commerce context. Kim and Song (2016) showed that parasocial interaction with YouTube creators predicted brand advocacy and repeat engagement beyond general attitude measures. The parasocial mechanism is theoretically amplified in Generation Z consumers, who spend substantially more time in parasocial digital relationship contexts and develop more elaborated parasocial bonds with micro and nano-influencers than older cohort consumers (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

2.4. Impulsive Purchase Behavior in Social Commerce

Impulsive purchasing, defined as unplanned buying behavior triggered by sudden and compelling stimuli encountered in a commercial environment, has been extensively studied in brick-and-mortar retail contexts but has gained renewed scholarly attention as social commerce platforms create new architectures of impulse trigger and friction reduction (Verhagen and van Dolen, 2011). The Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, adapted from environmental psychology, provides a useful organizing model: external stimuli in the social commerce environment (influencer content, limited-time offers, visual product displays) activate internal organism states (emotional arousal, brand trust, purchase urge) that culminate in purchase responses.

In emerging market social commerce contexts, impulsive purchasing has been shown to be particularly prevalent among mobile-first, social-media-heavy consumer populations. Chen and Yao (2018) documented significantly higher impulsive purchase rates on live commerce platforms compared to static e-commerce, attributing this to the real-time social pressure, scarcity signals, and influencer-generated emotional contagion that characterize the live format. Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2018) found in a Thai social commerce context that seller trust was the primary antecedent of impulsive purchase intention, with live interaction quality and perceived product authenticity as significant secondary predictors, confirming the centrality of trust in the social commerce purchase decision.

2.5. Cultural Dimensions and Cross-Cultural Consumer Behavior

The tightness-looseness cultural dimension, operationalized by Gelfand et al. (2011) as the degree to which a society has strong social norms and sanctions for deviance, offers theoretically grounded predictions about cross-cultural variation in influencer marketing reception. Tighter cultures, where conformity to social norms is more strongly enforced, may generate stronger reliance on influencer expertise as a norm-sanctioned guide to appropriate consumption choices, given the social risk of product selection errors in high-conformity environments. Looser cultures, where individual self-expression and personal choice are more normatively valued, may generate stronger reliance on influencer trustworthiness and authentic personality congruence as the primary trust drivers.

Of the three study countries, Egypt scores highest on cultural tightness (Gelfand et al., 2011), followed by Indonesia, with Nigeria exhibiting the most diverse regional variation but a comparatively looser national cultural profile. This ordering generates testable predictions about the relative effectiveness of expertise versus trustworthiness pathways that have not previously been examined using empirical social commerce data from these three national contexts.

2.6. Research Gaps

Five gaps in the existing literature motivate this study. First, cross-country studies simultaneously testing Source Credibility Theory, ELM, and parasocial relationship mechanisms within a unified structural model are absent from the influencer marketing literature. Second, generational comparison of influencer marketing mechanisms using CB-SEM multi-group analysis has not been conducted in any emerging market context. Third, the cultural tightness-looseness dimension has not been empirically tested as a moderator of influencer credibility pathway effectiveness. Fourth, the mediating role of brand trust in the influencer-purchase intention relationship has been posited theoretically but rarely tested with full mediation specification in emerging market social commerce samples. Fifth, Egypt, Nigeria, and Indonesia have been individually understudied in influencer marketing research, and no cross-national study has compared all three simultaneously.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed as the primary method, implemented through online self-administered questionnaires distributed to active social commerce users in Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria. Covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) was selected as the analytical method in preference to PLS-SEM because the study's theoretical model specifies reflective measurement structures and is oriented toward theory testing rather than prediction maximization, contexts in which CB-SEM's stricter distributional assumptions and superior goodness-of-fit diagnostics are

advantageous (Hair et al., 2019). Multi-group analysis using the chi-square difference test and the measurement invariance testing procedure of Vandenberg and Lance (2000) was employed for generational and cross-national comparative analysis. A secondary qualitative component involving 18 focus group discussions augmented the structural findings with contextual and experiential depth.

3.2. Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- Objective 1: To assess the direct effects of influencer expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness on brand trust among social commerce users in Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria.
- Objective 2: To test the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between influencer credibility dimensions and impulsive purchase intention.
- Objective 3: To examine parasocial relationship intensity as a moderator of the trustworthiness-brand trust relationship.
- Objective 4: To conduct cross-generational multi-group analysis comparing Generation Z and Millennial consumer pathways.
- Objective 5: To test cultural tightness-looseness as a country-level moderator of expertise versus trustworthiness pathway effectiveness.

3.3. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated on the basis of the theoretical framework:

- H1: Influencer expertise is positively associated with brand trust.
- H2: Influencer trustworthiness is positively associated with brand trust.
- H3: Influencer attractiveness is positively associated with brand trust.
- H4: Brand trust is positively associated with impulsive purchase intention.
- H5: Brand trust fully mediates the relationship between each influencer credibility dimension and impulsive purchase intention.
- H6: Parasocial relationship intensity positively moderates the relationship between influencer trustworthiness and brand trust.
- H7: Generation Z consumers exhibit significantly stronger parasocial relationship moderation effects than Millennial consumers.
- H8: Cultural tightness moderates the relative strength of the expertise pathway relative to the trustworthiness pathway in the influencer credibility-brand trust relationship.

3.4. Sample and Data Collection

The target population comprised adults aged 18 to 42 years who had made at least one purchase through a social commerce platform, defined as a purchase directly initiated or significantly influenced by social media influencer content, in the three months preceding the survey. Age eligibility was defined to capture both Generation Z (born 1997 to 2012, aged 18 to 28 at the time of data collection in mid-2025) and Millennial (born 1981 to 1996, aged 29 to 42) consumers within a single instrument.

Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria were selected to represent the Middle East and North Africa, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa respectively, and to provide the cross-cultural variation in tightness-looseness scores necessary to test H8. Data collection was conducted through online panel providers with established access to social media-active consumer populations in each country. Quota sampling ensured approximately equal representation of Generation Z and Millennial respondents and balanced gender representation. After removal of incomplete responses and failed attention check items, the final sample comprised 624 respondents: 214 from Egypt, 208 from Indonesia, and 202 from Nigeria. Of these, 52.4% were Generation Z and 47.6% were Millennials. Female respondents constituted 54.3% of the sample. The most frequently used platforms were Instagram (62.8%), TikTok (57.4%), YouTube (44.2%), and WhatsApp Commerce (38.6%).

3.5. Measures and Instruments

The survey instrument comprised six sections. Influencer expertise was measured using four items adapted from Ohanian (1990), assessing the perceived knowledge, competence, experience, and qualification of the respondent's primary followed influencer in their most recent social commerce purchase context. Influencer trustworthiness was assessed using five items adapted from Ohanian (1990) and updated for social media contexts following Lou and Yuan (2019), capturing perceived honesty, sincerity, disclosure transparency, and endorsement authenticity. Influencer attractiveness was measured using three items assessing physical and personality-based attractiveness perceptions. Parasocial relationship intensity was measured using eight items adapted from the Parasocial Interaction Scale of Rubin et al. (1985) and updated for social media contexts by Yuan and Lou (2020), capturing friendship-like familiarity, emotional engagement, and simulated social presence with the primary followed influencer.

Brand trust was assessed using six items adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), capturing both cognitive trust, reflecting confidence in brand reliability, and affective trust, reflecting emotional security and comfort with the brand. Impulsive purchase intention was measured using five items adapted from Verhagen and van Dolen (2011), capturing purchase urge intensity, spontaneity, and lack of prior planning. All items were anchored on seven-point Likert scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Platform usage frequency, product category (fashion and beauty, food and beverage, consumer electronics, home goods, and other), and monthly social commerce expenditure were collected as control variables.

Instrument translation employed a committee approach with independent forward and back translation by bilingual academics in each country, followed by cognitive debriefing with ten participants per country to verify comprehension equivalence. A pilot study with 72 respondents confirmed Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.79 to 0.91 across all constructs.

3.6. Analytical Strategy

CB-SEM was implemented using IBM AMOS 29. The measurement model was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) evaluating indicator loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. Full measurement invariance across generational and national groups was tested sequentially: configural invariance, metric invariance, and scalar invariance, before proceeding to structural group comparisons. The structural model was evaluated using maximum likelihood estimation with bootstrapped confidence intervals for indirect effects using 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Moderation by parasocial relationship intensity was tested by introducing product indicator interaction terms following the procedures recommended by Marsh et al. (2004) for latent variable interaction in CB-SEM. Generational and cross-national moderation was assessed through multi-group CFA and structural comparison using the chi-square difference test. Cultural tightness-looseness scores at the national level were incorporated as contextual moderators using a product of path coefficient differences across country groups, with Egypt assigned a tightness score of 5.6, Indonesia 4.9, and Nigeria 3.8, following Gelfand et al. (2011). Focus group data were analyzed using thematic analysis with a deductive theoretical framework supplemented by emergent inductive codes.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Measurement Model

CFA results confirmed adequate model fit: chi-square/df = 2.14, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.043 (90% CI: 0.036 to 0.051), SRMR = 0.051. All indicator loadings exceeded 0.65, ranging from 0.67 to 0.88. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.84 to 0.93, and AVE values from 0.54 to 0.72, confirming convergent validity. The Fornell and Larcker criterion was satisfied for all construct pairs, with the square root of each construct's AVE exceeding all inter-construct correlations. Common method bias was assessed through Harman's single-factor test, yielding a maximum single-factor variance of 24.7%, below the 50% threshold. Sequential measurement invariance testing confirmed full metric invariance across both generational groups and all three national samples, validating cross-group structural comparisons.

4.2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model demonstrated good fit: chi-square/df = 2.31, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.046, SRMR = 0.058. The model explained 61.3% of the variance in brand trust and 47.8% of the variance in impulsive purchase intention. Influencer trustworthiness exerted the strongest direct effect on brand trust (beta = 0.49, SE = 0.06, t = 8.17, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Influencer expertise had a significant positive effect (beta = 0.31, SE = 0.07, t = 4.43, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Influencer attractiveness showed a significant but smaller effect (beta = 0.18, SE = 0.06, t = 3.00, $p < 0.01$), supporting H3. Brand trust had a strong positive effect on impulsive purchase intention (beta = 0.58, SE = 0.07, t = 8.29, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4.

Mediation analysis supported H5: bootstrap confidence intervals confirmed full mediation of the expertise-purchase intention relationship through brand trust (indirect effect = 0.180, 95% CI: 0.112 to 0.254), full mediation of the trustworthiness-purchase intention relationship (indirect effect = 0.284, 95% CI: 0.198 to 0.371), and full mediation of the attractiveness-purchase intention relationship (indirect effect = 0.104, 95% CI: 0.051 to 0.163). The direct effects of all three credibility dimensions on impulsive purchase intention were non-significant after controlling for brand trust, confirming full mediation. This finding indicates that influencer credibility attributes generate purchase behavior exclusively through the brand trust mechanism, with no residual direct persuasion pathway.

4.3. Parasocial Relationship Moderation

The latent variable interaction between parasocial relationship intensity and influencer trustworthiness was positive and significant in predicting brand trust (beta = 0.26, SE = 0.09, t = 2.89, $p < 0.01$), supporting H6. The interaction between parasocial relationship intensity and influencer expertise was non-significant (beta = 0.09, $p = 0.18$), suggesting that parasocial bonds specifically amplify the trust-generating capacity of relational authenticity cues but do not similarly amplify expertise-based credibility. Slope analysis revealed that the trustworthiness-brand trust relationship was nearly twice as strong among high parasocial intensity respondents compared to low parasocial intensity respondents, a practically significant amplification consistent with the theoretical prediction that parasocial intimacy heightens susceptibility to trust transfer from credible relational sources.

4.4. Generational Multi-Group Analysis

Structural multi-group analysis comparing Generation Z and Millennial subsamples confirmed significant path coefficient differences for two of the eight specified structural paths. The parasocial relationship moderation effect was significantly stronger in Generation Z consumers (interaction beta = 0.38) than in Millennials (interaction beta = 0.17), with the chi-square difference test confirming significance (delta chi-square = 7.84, df = 1, $p < 0.01$), supporting H7. The trustworthiness-brand trust path was also significantly stronger in Generation Z (beta = 0.56) than Millennials (beta = 0.41, delta chi-square = 5.92, df = 1, $p < 0.05$), consistent with the higher parasocial engagement of digital-native consumers and their greater reliance on perceived authenticity over formal expertise credentials in influencer evaluation. No significant

generational differences were found for the expertise-brand trust or brand trust-purchase intention paths, suggesting that the fundamental trust-to-purchase mechanism is generationally stable while the inputs to trust formation differ across cohorts.

4.5. Cross-National Cultural Moderation

Structural path comparison across the three national samples revealed a pattern consistent with the cultural tightness-looseness moderation hypothesis (H8). The expertise-brand trust path was strongest in Egypt (beta = 0.41), intermediate in Indonesia (beta = 0.33), and smallest in Nigeria (beta = 0.22), following the descending tightness-looseness order. Conversely, the trustworthiness-brand trust path was weakest in Egypt (beta = 0.43), intermediate in Indonesia (beta = 0.49), and strongest in Nigeria (beta = 0.56). The product moment correlation between country tightness scores and expertise path coefficients was $r = 0.997$, and between tightness scores and trustworthiness path coefficients $r = -0.989$, providing near-perfect alignment with the cultural moderation prediction. Chi-square difference tests confirmed that the Egypt-Nigeria pairwise differences on both paths were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), supporting H8.

4.6. Focus Group Findings

Thematic analysis of the 18 focus group discussions across the three countries generated four thematic domains: the meaning and boundaries of influencer authenticity, platform architecture as an impulse trigger, the social currency of influencer-endorsed brands, and generational negotiation of skepticism and trust.

4.6.1. Theme 1: The Meaning and Boundaries of Influencer Authenticity

Authenticity emerged as the dominant evaluative criterion across all three national samples, though its meaning varied. Egyptian participants defined authenticity primarily through expertise demonstration, citing detailed product knowledge, professional background disclosure, and willingness to acknowledge product limitations as the markers distinguishing credible influencers from promotional actors. Indonesian participants emphasized community embeddedness, valuing influencers who visibly shared cultural contexts, local values, and everyday experiences with their audiences. Nigerian participants placed the greatest emphasis on personal integrity and avoiding over-commercialization, describing a threshold beyond which excessive sponsored content damaged an influencer's trustworthiness regardless of content quality. These nationally distinct authenticity constructions map closely onto the cultural tightness-looseness moderation finding, providing qualitative grounding for the quantitative cross-national path coefficient differences.

4.6.2. Theme 2: Platform Architecture as an Impulse Trigger

Participants across all generational cohorts described specific platform design features as active agents in their purchase decision processes. TikTok Shop's one-tap purchase integration, Instagram's shoppable story stickers, and live commerce countdown timers were cited as creating purchase urgency that bypassed deliberative evaluation in ways that static display advertising never achieved. Several Generation Z participants described a habituated purchase-as-reaction pattern in which adding items to cart had become an automatic response to influencer content rather than a considered decision, with completion to payment representing the decision point rather than initial cart addition. This platformized impulse architecture is consistent with the SOR framework and suggests that platform design co-produces impulsive purchase outcomes alongside influencer content quality.

4.6.3. Theme 3: The Social Currency of Influencer-Endorsed Brands

A recurrent theme across national samples but with particular intensity among Egyptian and Indonesian participants was the social signaling value of consuming influencer-endorsed brands. Participants described influencer endorsement as conferring a quality certification that reduced the social risk of conspicuous consumption in high-conformity peer environments, consistent with the cultural tightness-looseness moderation finding. Several Indonesian participants explicitly described influencer purchase decisions as socially verifiable through shared posts and stories, creating a secondary social commerce loop in which follower purchases of influencer-endorsed brands generated social approval that reinforced brand trust and created word-of-mouth diffusion within social networks.

4.6.4. Theme 4: Generational Negotiation of Skepticism and Trust

Millennial participants consistently described more sophisticated influencer evaluation strategies than their Generation Z counterparts, including cross-referencing product claims with independent reviews, checking influencer disclosure compliance, and calibrating trust based on endorsement frequency and commercial density. Generation Z participants, while not uniformly uncritical, described faster and more instinctive trust formation processes grounded in parasocial intimacy rather than systematic credibility evaluation, consistent with the stronger parasocial moderation effects documented in the quantitative analysis. Several Millennial participants described a personal evolution from early uncritical influencer trust toward more discerning evaluation as accumulated negative experiences with misleading endorsements had shaped more skeptical consumption habits, suggesting that generational differences in influencer marketing reception may partly reflect lifecycle and experience effects as well as cohort-specific media socialization.

V. DISCUSSION

This study yields six theoretical contributions to the influencer marketing, social commerce, and cross-cultural consumer behavior literatures. First, the confirmation of full mediation of all influencer credibility dimensions through brand trust (H5 supported for all three paths) establishes that influencer marketing effectiveness operates exclusively through trust as a mediating mechanism in social commerce contexts, with no residual direct persuasion pathway. This finding resolves an ambiguity in the prior literature, where some studies have documented direct credibility effects on purchase intention without

controlling for trust, and clarifies that brand trust is the operative construct in influencer-driven commerce rather than a secondary consideration. For brand managers, this implies that influencer selection should prioritize trust-generating attributes over direct call-to-action effectiveness metrics.

Second, the dominance of influencer trustworthiness over expertise in predicting brand trust (H2 supported, beta = 0.49 versus H1 supported, beta = 0.31) confirms the relational authenticity hypothesis and extends it to emerging market social commerce contexts. This hierarchy aligns with peripheral route processing predictions from ELM: in the high-volume, low-deliberation environment of social commerce feeds, relational trust cues are more cognitively accessible and emotionally resonant than expertise evaluations that would require systematic processing. The implication for brand managers is that influencer selection criteria should weight evidence of genuine product engagement, disclosure transparency, and audience relationship quality more heavily than follower-reported expertise perceptions.

Third, the parasocial moderation finding (H6 supported, beta = 0.26) provides empirically grounded support for the theoretical proposition that parasocial relationship intensity amplifies the trust-generative capacity of influencer trustworthiness but not expertise. This specificity is theoretically informative: parasocial bonds create a relational context in which trustworthiness signals are received with heightened affective processing, generating stronger emotional trust responses. Expertise signals, which require more cognitive evaluation, are not similarly amplified by the emotional relational context of parasocial engagement. This distinction has not been previously documented in the influencer marketing literature and suggests that micro-influencers with deep parasocial audience relationships may generate disproportionately large trust effects per credibility unit relative to macro-influencers with more professional but less parasocially intense audience relationships.

Fourth, the generational amplification of parasocial moderation effects (H7 supported) adds empirical precision to the widely cited but rarely rigorously tested claim that Generation Z consumers are more susceptible to influencer marketing than Millennials. The finding that this susceptibility operates specifically through parasocial intensity amplification of trustworthiness effects, rather than through uniformly higher credibility sensitivity, provides a mechanism-level understanding that is more actionable for practitioners than the aggregate generational claim. Campaigns targeting Generation Z consumers should invest in long-format content that deepens parasocial familiarity rather than exclusively optimizing for reach and impression volume.

Fifth, the cultural tightness-looseness moderation of expertise versus trustworthiness pathway effectiveness (H8 supported) represents the first empirical validation of Gelfand et al.'s (2011) framework in an influencer marketing context and provides theoretically grounded guidance for cross-market campaign calibration. Brands operating across culturally diverse emerging markets should not apply uniform influencer selection and content strategies but should adjust the relative emphasis on expertise demonstration versus relational authenticity cultivation to match the normative compliance orientations of each cultural context.

Sixth, the qualitative documentation of platform architecture as an active impulse trigger that operates alongside influencer content quality points to an understudied design dimension of social commerce effectiveness that quantitative structural models capturing only consumer psychology cannot fully represent. Future research should incorporate platform UX design variables as explicit antecedents of impulsive purchase behavior alongside influencer and consumer psychological constructs.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study provides a theoretically integrated and empirically robust analysis of how influencer credibility dimensions generate brand trust and impulsive purchase intention across generational cohorts and cultural contexts in three major emerging markets. The finding that brand trust fully mediates all influencer-to-purchase pathways, that trustworthiness dominates expertise in trust generation, and that parasocial relationship intensity amplifies trustworthiness effects with particular strength among Generation Z consumers establishes a clear and actionable hierarchy of influencer marketing mechanisms for practitioners and regulators operating in emerging market social commerce environments.

For brand managers and marketing agencies, the study's findings argue for a trust-first influencer selection framework that prioritizes audience relationship quality metrics, disclosure compliance history, and parasocial depth indicators over reach and engagement rate metrics that dominate current industry measurement practices. In emerging markets with tight cultural environments such as Egypt, expertise demonstration content should receive greater creative investment. In looser cultural environments such as Nigeria, authentic personality expression and community integration should be prioritized. Cross-generational campaign strategies should differentiate between Generation Z executions that invest in parasocial depth and Millennial executions that address the more systematic credibility evaluation typical of that cohort.

For social commerce platform operators, the qualitative evidence on purchase architecture as an active impulse trigger raises important design ethics questions about the boundary between convenience and manipulation in one-tap purchasing integrations. Responsible platform design should ensure that consumers have meaningful opportunities for purchase reflection between cart addition and payment completion, particularly for higher-value categories where impulsive decisions are more likely to generate post-purchase regret and return costs.

For consumer protection regulators in Egypt, Indonesia, and Nigeria, the study's evidence on the full trust-mediation mechanism and generational susceptibility differences argues for strengthening mandatory influencer disclosure requirements and monitoring compliance actively. Regulators should consider whether current general advertising standards adequately address the unique trust dynamics of parasocial commerce relationships, in which the commercial nature of endorsements may be genuinely invisible to high-parasocial-intensity followers who experience influencer recommendations as friend advice rather than paid promotion.

The study has several limitations that invite future research. The cross-sectional design captures a static snapshot of a rapidly evolving market, and longitudinal tracking of how influencer-brand trust relationships evolve with platform saturation, influencer audience fatigue, and regulatory interventions would substantially enrich the field. The focus on the primary

followed influencer may understate the complexity of multi-influencer exposure in actual social commerce environments. Future research should examine the cumulative and potentially competing trust effects of multiple influencer relationships, the role of negative influencer incidents in trust erosion, and the long-term brand equity implications of influencer-mediated trust building versus destruction.

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