

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Choosing Fast-Moving Consumer Goods Among Generation Z in China.

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Abstract: Social media influencers have become indispensable in today's business. They have an influence on social media platforms and exert persuasive power over their followers. As Generation Z gradually represents a larger proportion of social media users who heavily rely on the digital world and have ever-increasing purchasing power, the business owner put more emphasis on this target group than ever. Especially in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, products or brands need to gain a position in the minds of consumers as soon as possible owing to intenser competition. Business owners turn to social media influencers as the best product endorsers. Therefore, constructing a conceptual framework by integrating Source Credibility Model(SCM) and Celebrity Influence Model(CIM), this study examines the impact of social media influencers on choosing fast-moving consumer goods among Generation Z in China. Study findings indicate that purchase intention is influenced by para-social relationships with social media influences and followers' identification. They are also influenced by the characteristics of social media influencers. The results of this study are expected to extend the knowledge about social media influencers. In addition, it also helps online retailers to improve their social media marketing.

Keywords: Social media influencer; Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG); Generation Z; Source Credibility Model (SCM); Celebrity Influence Model (CIM)

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

China has the world's most prominent social media market (Thomala, 2022a). The active social media users increased by 52.5 million from 2020 to 2021, reaching 983.3 million people in 2021 (Thomala, 2022b). In 2021, approximately 73% of the Chinese population used the Internet (Wahab et al., 2022). Internet users mainly use microblogging (Weibo) and other mainstream social media platforms, such as Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok), Red, and Zhihu (Thomala, 2022a).

As the Chinese social media ecosystem becomes robust, more and more brands prefer to promote products and build awareness through social media, which brings a more profound impact on consumer behaviors and perceptions (Wahab et al.,

2022). Chinese social media have extended their functions to e-commerce, combining social with shopping. Specifically, users are free to post pictures or videos about their purchase experience, personal suggestions, and usage feedback. Part of them is viewed as key opinion leaders on social media platforms because of their trustworthy and valuable content. Since the emergence of social media influencers, businesses' communication and interaction with customers and potential customers have essentially altered (Koay et al., 2021). For example, potential customers are led to click the links directly or turn to other e-commerce apps to learn and purchase related products while browsing influencers' recommendations. Therefore, customers' purchase intentions directly connect with social media influencers. According to Nielsen China, social recommendations lead to 80% of impulse purchases, such as online content and word-of-mouth (Degennaro, 2021). Firms increasingly cooperate with digital influencers to advertise their products (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Fast-moving consumer goods sector is a typical example.

Items in this category are consumed daily, so FMCG goods account for a substantial part of a family's monthly budget (Sridevi, 2014). Great demand results in an enormous number of items circulated in the market. Besides, the online channel has become a preferred alternative for Chinese customers to purchase FMCG goods, especially after COVID-19 (Yu, 2020). The Chinese government took initiatives of housing and neighborhood lockdowns to prevent, deter, and detect the spread of the pandemic so that customers are forced to stay at home (Mariia & Viktoriia, 2022). Many families rely on e-commerce platforms to choose products, particularly FMCG goods. In 2021, the proportion of the sales of FMCG goods through the Internet accounted for 27% in China; the sales of FMCG goods in supermarkets are only second to that (Ma, 2022). Therefore, the intense competition in the FMCG sector and a shift in purchase behaviors lead FMCG businesses to cooperate with online celebrities to endorse products on social media platforms (Sridevi, 2014). Generation Z is a vital group significantly impacted by social media influencers in China.

The members of Generation Z were born and developed in the digital era. They are highly dependent on social media, a crucial channel for obtaining information (Nurhandayani et al., 2019). Global consultancy Accenture anticipated that global social commerce would boost from \$492 billion to \$1.2 trillion over a span of 4 years (2021-2025), three times faster than traditional e-commerce (Kelly, 2022). Generation Z is believed to be the main driving power behind the growth (Fan, 2022). Sun et al. (2021) reported that 70% of Generation Z prefer to purchase from social media platforms. While many studies have addressed the functions of social media influencers (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019), the impact of social media influencers on the purchase of fast-moving consumer goods by Generation Z in China remains understudied. This study attempts to solve this problem by combining Source Credibility Model (SCM) with Celebrity Influence Model (CIM) models.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The study aims to investigate the impact of social media influencers on choosing fast-moving consumer goods among Generation Z in China by combining SCM and CIM. The following research goals must be facilitated in order for the study to achieve its goal:

1. By combining SCM and CIM, explore how the social media influencers' characteristics (perceived attractiveness, perceived expertise, and perceived trustworthiness) affect para-social relationship, identification, and purchase intention.
2. To explore whether the relationship between social media influencers' characteristics and followers' purchase intentions is mediated by para-social relationship and identification.

SCM and CIM are the two most common models used to assess endorsement effectiveness (Rungruangjit, 2022). However, in previous studies, only a few have combined the two. In addition, although many studies have analyzed the impact of social media influencers on followers' purchase intentions, including luxury fashion, cosmetic products, and automobiles (Chekima et al., 2020; Kshetri & Jha, 2016; Sun et al., 2021), rare studies specifically explore the impact of social media influencers on Chinese Generation Z's purchase intention, particularly for FMCG products.

This study explains how social media influencers' characteristics (attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness) influence the Chinese Generation Z's purchasing decisions on FMCG products. This provides excellent value for FMCG businesses to select proper social media influencers and thus attract more Generation Z who possess the great potential of purchasing power in China and increase their purchase intentions.

1.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

1.3.1 Source Credibility Model (SCM) (Ohanian, 1990)

"Source credibility" is widely used to examine the receivers' acceptance of information affected by the message disseminator's positive traits. The SCM was derived from a turning point research by Hovland and his associates (Ohanian, 1990). The perceived credibility of the message disseminator is influenced by two factors, expertise and trustworthiness. Ohanian (1990) defines expertise as authoritativeness, competence, expertness, and qualification. Trustworthiness is defined as the degree of confidence and the level of acceptance receivers have in communication (Ohanian, 1990). So far, many studies use SCM as a theoretical framework to analyze how social media influencers' credibility affects advertising effectiveness, for example, whether it is appropriate to invite social media influencers to endorse cosmetic products in Malaysia rather than traditional celebrities (Chekima et al., 2020).

1.4 Theoretical Framework-Source Credibility

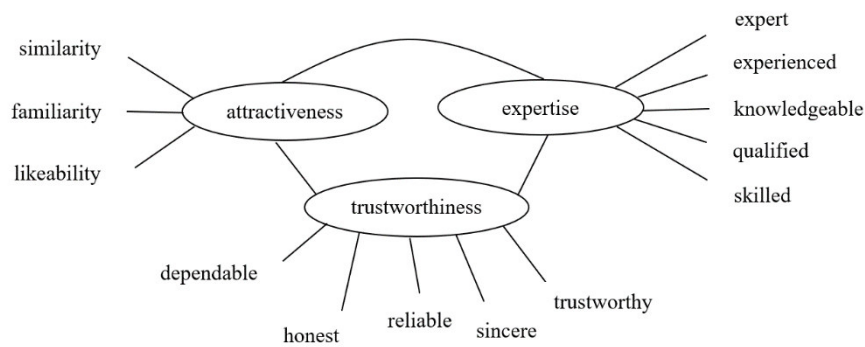


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework-Source Credibility

1.4.1 Celebrity Influence Model (CIM) (Fraser & Brown, 2002)

CIM is a model widely used to explain the ways that individuals are affected by media exposure (Wahab et al., 2022). The CIM model is built on para-social relationships and identification (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). Identification is defined as the reconstruction of individual attitudes, values, or behaviors towards the real or imagined images of admired people via personal and mediated relationships (Fraser & Brown, 2002). A para-social relationship created by the mass media builds a virtual face-to-face relationship between celebrities and audiences (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). More and more studies based on CIM have shown that this theory is not only appropriate to find out the effect of traditional celebrities on audiences but also the effect of social media influencers on followers (Wahab et al., 2022).

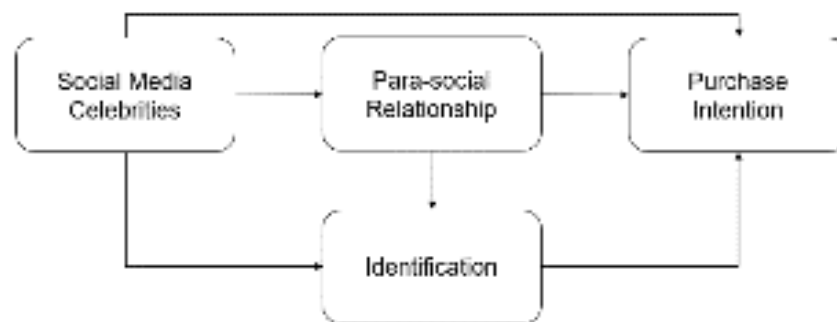
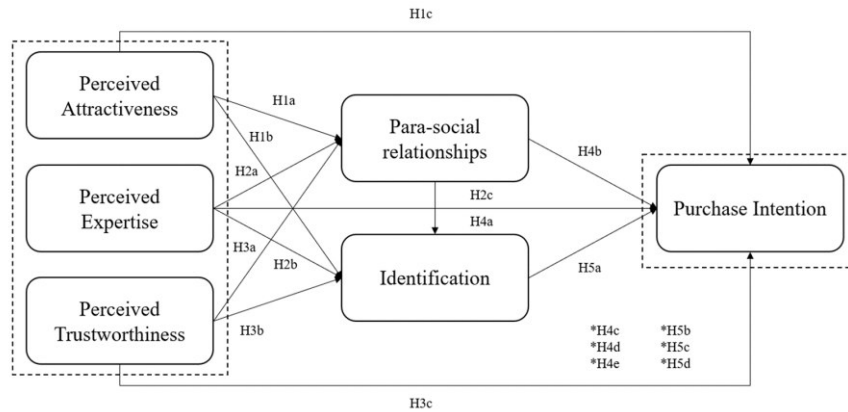


Figure 2: Theoretical Model

Based on the review of literature, the conceptual model is presented in Figure 3.



2 Hypothesis Development

H1a: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.

H1b: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with followers' identification.

H1c: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with purchase intentions.

H2a: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.

H2b: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with followers' identification.

H2c: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with purchase intentions.

H3a: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.

H3b: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with followers' identification.

H3c: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with purchase intentions.

H4a: Para-social relationships with social media influencers are positively associated with followers' identification.

H4b: Para-social relationships with social media influencers are positively associated with followers' purchase intentions.

H4c: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions.

H4d: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived expertise and purchase intentions.

H4e: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.

H4e: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.

H5a: Followers' identification is positively associated with followers' purchase intentions.

H5b: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions.

H5c: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived expertise and purchase intentions.

H5d: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Generation Z and Consumption of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods

Those born between the middle of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2010s are known as Generation Z (Hua et al., 2022). They are regarded as “digital natives” who grow up surrounded by the Internet and digital technologies (Wang et al.,

2022). Exposure to technology at an early age shapes their different ways of interacting with the world (Munsch, 2021). For example, they are accustomed to dealing with repetitive tasks with the hand of technology (Munsch, 2021). Generation Z is also known as the “Second Generation of Only Child” (Alessia, 2019). As the only child in the family, their parents are inclined to provide adequate financial support, which allows them to enjoy their life without financial pressure (Alessia, 2019). Therefore, their purchasing power outstrips their income level (Hua et al., 2022).

In the past, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) businesses believed that consumers would be pleased if they were provided with several choices (Thangavel et al., 2019). According to Iyengar and Lepper’s academic research, however, excessive options will cause a ‘mind freeze’ when consumers make purchasing decisions (Thangavel et al., 2019). For Generation Z, they seek immediate and instant action (Hua et al., 2022). Therefore, they are more likely to get confused about countless choices and get into the dilemma that other choices would be better compared with the choice they have already made (Thangavel et al., 2019). Therefore, businesses need to stand out among competitors and win the customers’ minds as soon as possible.

3.2 Social Media Influencers and Fast-Moving Consumer Goods

On social media platforms, anyone who can exert influence is often called as “blogger,” “vlogger,” “YouTuber” or “KOL (key opinion leader)””; more generally, they are also regarded as “social media influencer” (Nurhandayani et al., 2019). Social media influencers receive much attention and popularity via posting self-generated content on various topics, such as beauty, travel, and food (Chekima et al., 2020). Studies indicate that people prefer to listen more carefully to suggestions from others than to advertisements in media, which is also the basis of influencer marketing: followers trust social media influencers more than commercials (Panyi et al., 2017). Influencer marketing is perceived as native advertising, integrating advertising messages with non-advertising content (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). This pattern effectively presents products and weakens consumers’ resistance (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019).

In the FMCG sector, trust dominates customers’ purchasing decisions (Chandpuri & Ahuja, 2020). One of the characteristics of FMCG products is relatively high frequency (Cha & Park, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to build trust in the minds of consumers to keep them as regular customers (Chandpuri & Ahuja, 2020). For businesses, social media influencers, as the ones who possess persuasive power over their followers or fans, are viewed suitable to propagate products and provoke the interests of potential customers, especially among “digital savvy” (Nurhandayani et al., 2019).

3.3 Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

3.3.1 Source Credibility Model (SCM)

Source credibility refers to the receiver's perception of the attributes of the sender (Zhang, 2018). It is often used in Marketing and Communication research literature (Ayeh, 2015). In Marketing studies, SCM is applied to study the effectiveness of celebrity recommendation advertising and celebrity endorsement, while in Communication studies, this model is used to examine different media platforms in terms of their credibility (Ayeh, 2015; Seiler & Kucza, 2017). Previous discoveries studied the effects of source credibility on purchase intention, information adoption, information validity, and information trustworthiness (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Current researchers demonstrate that source expertise, source trustworthiness, and para-social relationships between media users and media influencers affect the source of information people to perceive (Ismagilova et al., 2020).

The model points out that source attributes have an impact on the value of a message (Chekima et al., 2020). Source attributes also influence the persuasiveness of a message (Corina, 2006). Source credibility can be demonstrated in various aspects (Zhang, 2018). For example, Hovland, Janis, and Kelley's research indicate that source expertise and source trustworthiness are two key dimensions; McCroskey's research introduces two other dimensions: authoritativeness and character; Wynn's research examines expertness, dynamism, believability, and sociability (Zhang, 2018). Ohanian (1990) creates a source-credibility scale to examine three dimensions: attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise through exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory analysis.

3.3.2 Celebrity Influence Model (CIM)

Celebrity Influence Model is first presented by Fraser and Brown (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). This model finds that mediated personalities have the potential power to forecast various outcomes in terms of attitude, emotion, cognition, and behavior (Wen, 2017). It highlights the ways that people are affected by media exposure (Wahab et al., 2022). For existing research, this model is used to identify the effect of traditional celebrities on their followers (Wahab et al., 2022). Few studies apply CIM to study online celebrities (Wahab et al., 2022). For instance, Wahab and Tao (2019) find that Internet celebrities have an impact on purchase decisions.

Para-social relationships and identification are two basic psychological concepts of this model (Wen, 2017). Followers build a liking for celebrities through a para-social relationship, which is a one-sided and virtual face-to-face relationship between audiences and celebrities. (Wahab et al., 2022; Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). Media exposure is necessary for para-social relationships because people have few opportunities to meet celebrities in person and thus follow celebrities through the media (Wen, 2017). This relationship causes individuals to develop an

identification with celebrities (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). Followers tend to adopt and imitate the behaviors of celebrities due to identification (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021).

3.3.3 Perceived Attractiveness

Previous studies regarded endorser attractiveness as a critical attribute of promotion (Taillon, 2020). Attractiveness impacts an individual's popularity degree, persuasive power, and others' attitudes (Taillon, 2020). If endorsers possess attractive appearances or characters, audiences are more likely to purchase the products advertised or used by the endorsers, expecting to have the resembled characteristics (Zhang, 2018). An attractive information sender is more likely to influence audiences' attitudes and beliefs (Zhang, 2018). Physical appearance is crucial and seldom overlooked (Seiler & Kucza, 2017). Social media influencers' physical appeal can strengthen the endorsement's effectiveness (Chekima et al., 2020).

Zhang's (2018) study shows that influencers' social attractiveness is positively associated with para-social relationships between audiences and influencers (Zhang, 2018). Hoffner and Buchanan's (2005) study indicates that physical appearance is associated with wishful identification. Previous empirical findings present that source attractiveness positively impacts persuasion (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Based on previous research, this study gives rise to the following hypothesis:

H1a: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.

H1b: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with followers' identification.

H1c: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with purchase intentions.

3.3.4 Perceived Expertise

The definition of expertise is "the extent to which the source is perceived as being capable of providing correct information" (Ismagilova et al., 2020). People who get training and experience in a specific field are perceived as one who has the expertise (Racherla & Friske, 2012). Expertise has a persuasive function in that receivers have little incentive to retrieve their ideas to determine the authenticity of information (Racherla & Friske, 2012). Source expertise impacts attitudes and source credibility positively (Seiler & Kucza, 2017). According to Ohanian's research, source expertise plays a positive role in attitude change in terms of endorser marketing (Aych, 2015). Other researchers also find that source expertise positively affects information usefulness (Aych, 2015). It is more legitimate to utilize a qualified and

professional person as an endorser than utilize usual information and advertorials (Chekima et al., 2020).

Although the effect of perceived expertise on para-social relationships has been little studied in the previous literature, some studies have examined the effect of specialized skills and knowledge on para-social relationships that media users perceive with media figures (Zhang et al., 2021). Ismagilova et al. (2020) found that source expertise has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intentions. Based on previous research, this study puts forward the following hypothesis:

H2a: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.

H2b: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with followers' identification.

H2c: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with purchase intentions.

3.3.5 Perceived Trustworthiness

Janssen et al. (2022) point out that influencer trustworthiness refers to the degree to which consumers perceive influencers as reliable specialists on a product or service. Existing studies underscore that source trustworthiness influences a variety of consumer outcomes (Ayeh, 2015). For example, a trustworthy source can change opinions (Seiler & Kucza, 2017). If trust is missing, different attributes owned by endorser will not be noticeable in changing customers' opinions (Chekima et al., 2020). Trustworthiness allows audiences to acquire truthful and reliable product information (Chekima et al., 2020). When the source is trustworthy, receivers have less doubt about the information's credibility (Ismagilova et al., 2020).

Previous studies emphasized the effect of perceived attractiveness and similarity, but there is still a research space for the association between perceived trustworthiness and para-social relationships (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Therefore, we expect that influencers' perceived trustworthiness will affect para-social relationships. There are two significant processes by which brand endorsement influences advertising effectiveness: one is identification, and the other is perceived trustworthiness (Schouten, 2020). Chekima et al. (2020) indicate that source trustworthiness is associated with customers' purchase intentions. Based on this evidence, we hypothesize as follows:

H3a: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.

H3b: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with followers' identification.

H3c: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with purchase intentions.

3.3.6 Para-social relationship

Recent research on para-social relationships has enhanced people's understanding of marketing, especially in influencer marketing (Bu & Thaichon, 2022). Para-social relationships are defined as the imagined and single-sided relationship between media followers and media celebrities (Shang & Luo, 2021). The perceived social relationships between celebrities and followers are similar to interpersonal ones; however, they are built not through direct social interaction but through vicarious interaction (Wen, 2017). Media figures dominate this relationship by creating an image to affect the perceptions of media users on them (Zhang, 2018). Audiences' internal need is satisfied psychologically and emotionally because celebrities can bring them a sense of closeness and companionship (Zhang et al., 2021). This perceived intimate relationship is initiated and kept only by followers without the awareness of celebrities (Wen, 2017).

The celebrity influence model indicates that para-social relationships between media figures and media users facilitate the media users' identification (Wahab et al., 2022). According to Bu & Thaichon (2022), para-social relationships influence followers perceived similarity with celebrities; besides, higher similarity individuals believe in having with celebrities leads to a greater possibility people have a strong sense of identification with celebrities. Para-social relationships between followers and social media influencers lead to favorable customer experiences, which influence the purchase intentions of followers by providing practical values (Kim et al., 2015). Few existing studies focus on how para-social relationships affect the association between endorsers' characteristics and audiences' purchase intentions. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4a: Para-social relationships with social media influencers are positively associated with followers' identification.

H4b: Para-social relationships with social media influencers are positively associated with followers' purchase intentions.

H4c: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions.

H4d: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived expertise and purchase intentions.

H4e: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.

3.3.7 Identification and purchase intention

Identification is a psychological process that a person desires and expects to become a character he or she identifies with (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Followers' identification plays a vital role in the effect of information they receive from celebrities because followers will imitate celebrities' values, beliefs, and behaviors (Wahab et al., 2022; Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). For instance, college students perceive cosmetic surgery positively after being affected by celebrities (Wen, 2017). Some individuals have identification with celebrities personally (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021). Elvis Presley's followers regard Elvis as a husband, friend, and father (Aşman Alikiliç & Özer, 2021).

Nurhandayani et al. (2019) indicate that someone's buying interest is influenced by (1) others' attitudes. Whether positive or negative, others' attitudes towards a product or service will limit a person's purchase choices. (2) unknown factors. These will influence a customer's position when making a purchase decision. Wahab et al.'s (2022) research show that followers' identification positively influences their purchase intentions. Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H5a: Followers' identification is positively associated with followers' purchase intentions.

H5b: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions.

H5c: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived expertise and purchase intentions.

H5d: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.

4 Research Method

4.1 Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

In this study, an online questionnaire was created to investigate the impact of social media influencers on choosing fast-moving consumer goods among Generation Z in China. The questionnaire was first created in English before being translated into

Chinese. Chinese Generation Z participants range in age from 12 to 27 and have a variety of vocations and monthly salaries. In Table 1, the participant demographics are displayed as percentages. Among the 355 participants, 148 were males and 207 were females. Their ages are concentrated between 21 and 23. 85.63% of them are students, and 68.17% of them have less than 1,500 RMB monthly income.

Table 1. Demographics of respondents

Demographics	Frequency%
Gender	
Male	41.69
Female	58.31
Age	
12-14	15.21
15-17	14.93
18-20	21.69
21-23	25.92
24-27	22.25
Occupation	
Students	85.63
Unemployed	3.38
Part-time	4.79
Full-time	6.2
Monthly Income	
<1,500 RMB	68.17
1,500-3,000RMB	13.8
3,001-4,500 RMB	5.63
4,501-6,000 RMB	3.1
6,001-7,500 RMB	3.66
>7,500 RMB	5.63
Frequency of social media usage	
Never	0.85
Sometimes	28.17
Usually	32.96
Always	38.03
Social media platforms used to follow celebrities	
Douyin	55.49
Xiaohongshu	56.9
Weibo	40.28
Bilibili	40.28
QQ	35.77
WeChat	38.59
Zhihu	31.27
Douban	29.58
Kuaishou	0.56
How many social media influencers you follow?	
Below 50	20.56

50~100	20.28
101~150	17.18
151~200	18.03
Above 200	23.94
Do you buy products because a social media influencer promoted them?	
Always	16.62
Often	18.59
Sometimes	25.92
Rarely	21.41
Never	17.46

4.2 Measures and Reliability Tests

We modified the items for the questionnaire from existing research to fit the setting of this study in order to guarantee the constructs' validity and reliability. The variables used in this study came from prior studies. The constructs including attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, para-social relationships, identification, and purchase intention were adopted from Ohanian (1990) and Wahab et al. (2022). A seven-point Likert scale, with a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), was used to evaluate the questionnaire's 31 items.

In order to quantify the internal consistency of a test or scale, Lee Cronbach created the alpha statistic in 1951; it is represented as a number between 0 and 1 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The correlations between items are determined by the statistic employed in a Cronbach's alpha (Connelly, 2011). The number of items in a test determines the alpha score; for instance, if the number of items increases from 4 to 10, the test's reliability will increase from 0.80 to 0.86 (Vaske et al., 2017). Taber's research (2018) demonstrates that alpha values of 0.7 or above are perceived as acceptable reliability for a test. Besides, excellent alpha values present a span between 0.93 and 0.94, and strong alpha values range between 0.91 and 0.93. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the consistency of the variables. All of the valid survey responses required for this investigation were acquired in three weeks. The Cronbach's alpha value for each variable is shown in Table 2. Four of the six alpha values are above 0.93, and the remaining two are between 0.91 and 0.93, which offers excellent and good reliability of all variables.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha (α) of Each Variable

Variables	No. of Items	α
Perceived Attractiveness (PS)	5	0.922
Perceived Expertise (PE)	5	0.929
Perceived Trustworthiness (PS)	5	0.936
Para-social Relationship (PSR)	6	0.939
Identification (IN)	5	0.936
Purchase Intention (PI)	5	0.937

4.3 Correlation Test

The correlation coefficient, sometimes referred to as the r coefficient, is a statistic that measures how strongly or to what extent two variables are related (Taylor, 1990). Theoretically, the correlation coefficient can take any value from -1 to +1 (Ratner, 2009). 0 indicates no linear relationship between the variables (Taylor, 1990). The strength of the correlation between the measured variables increases as the r gets near ± 1 (Taylor, 1990). If variable A increases, variable B will also increase, according to a positive correlation coefficient. An inverse relationship is shown by a negative r coefficient (Taylor, 1990).

Table 3. Correlation analysis between the variables

Variable	PA	PE	PT	PSR	IN	PI
PA	1					
PE	0.895**	1				
PT	0.859**	0.896**	1			
PSR	0.875**	0.857**	0.859**	1		
IN	0.864**	0.847**	0.860**	0.929**	1	
PI	0.894**	0.878**	0.885**	0.913**	0.908**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 displays the findings of an investigation of correlations between various variables. According to the research of Ratner (2009), a weak positive (negative) relationship between two variables is indicated by correlation coefficient values within 0~0.3 (-0.3~0). The $|r|$ value ranges between 0.3 and 0.7, showing a moderate correlation. If the value ranges from 0.7 to 1 or from -0.7 to -1, it indicates a strong positive or negative relationship between the variables. All the data gathered above exhibit a strong positive correlation between any two variables.

5 Results

5.1 Evaluation of Measurement Results

Regression analysis is used to examine the relationship between variables for statistical purposes (Sykes, 1993). Regression analysis is based on the fundamental tenet that all variables are statistically independent of one another, or at the very least uncorrelated (Liang & Zeger, 1993). The causal effect of one variable on the other and the “statistical significance” of anticipated correlations can be measured and assessed (Sykes, 1993). According to MacKinnon et al. (2007), mediation is the insertion of a third variable to the relationship between X and Y: X influences M (mediating variable) and M affects Y. In the single-mediator model, a denotes the relationship between X and M, b denotes the relationship between M and Y after X adjustment, c' denotes the relationship between X and Y after M adjustment, and residuals in the M and Y are denoted by the symbols e2 and e3.

Regarding the research's hypotheses model, PA, PE, and PT are the independent variables that will impact PSR, IN, and PI. PSR and IN are mediating variables that mediate the relationships between PA and PI, between PE and PI, and between PT and PI and that impact PI.

5.2 Hypothesis Analysis

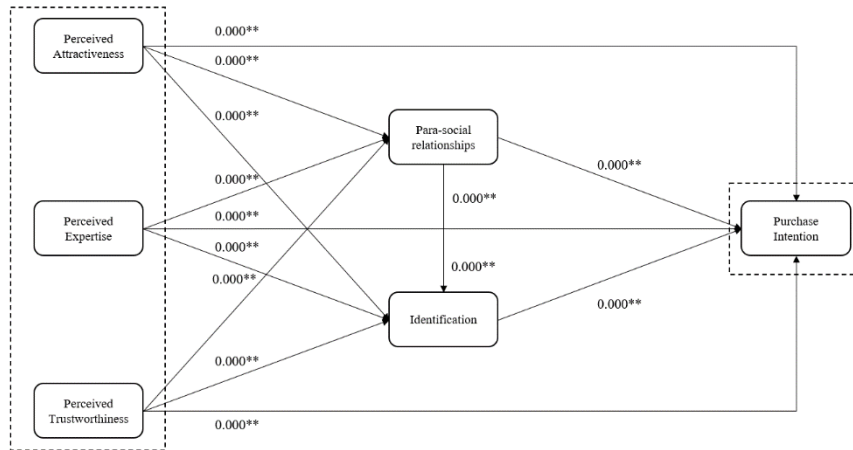
The results of the structural model study are shown in Table 4. We can infer from the analysis that social media influencers' perceived attractiveness will greatly affect para-social relationships between audiences and social media influencers. H1a is accepted since $\beta = 0.881$, $p < 0.01$. In H1b, $\beta = 0.886$, $p < 0.01$; thus, H1b is supported, and social media influencers' perceived attractiveness will greatly affect followers' identification. For H1c, since $\beta = 0.918$, $p < 0.01$, H1c is supported, leading to the conclusion that social media influencers' perceived attractiveness will greatly affect purchase intention. Social media influencers' perceived expertise ($\beta = 0.882$, $p < 0.01$) had a great effect on para-social relationships; thus, accepting H2a. Moreover, perceived expertise ($\beta = 0.882$, $p < 0.01$) will greatly influence followers' identification, so accepting H2b. H2c is accepted since $\beta = 0.920$, $p < 0.01$; thus, perceived expertise will greatly affect followers' purchase intention. Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.885$, $p < 0.01$) was found to significantly affect para-social relationships between followers and social media influencers; thus, supporting H3a. Perceived trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.903$, $p < 0.01$) was found to significantly impact followers' identification; thus, supporting H3b. H3c is supported since $\beta = 0.931$, $p < 0.01$, with the conclusion that perceived trustworthiness will greatly affect purchase intention. Para-social relationship ($\beta = 0.947$, $p < 0.01$) was indicated to greatly affect followers' identification; thus, accepting H4a. For H4b, since $\beta = 0.931$, $p < 0.01$, H4b is supported, resulting in the conclusion that para-social relationships will significantly influence purchase

intention. H4c is accepted since $\beta = 0.918$, $p < 0.01$; therefore, para-social relationship has a mediating effect on the relationship between perceived attractiveness and purchase intention. In H4d, $\beta = 0.920$, $p < 0.01$; thus, H4d is supported, resulting in the conclusion that para-social relationship mediates the correlation between perceived expertise and purchase intention. Para-social relationship ($\beta = 0.931$, $p < 0.01$) mediates the relationship between perceived trustworthiness and followers' purchase intentions. Identification ($\beta = 0.909$, $p < 0.01$) was accepted to greatly impact purchase intention; therefore, H5a was supported. H5b is accepted since $\beta = 0.918$, $p < 0.01$, with the result that followers' identification mediates the relationship between perceived attractiveness and purchase intention. For H5c, since $\beta = 0.920$, $p < 0.01$, H5c is supported, resulting in the conclusion that identification has a mediating impact on the relationship between perceived expertise and purchase intention. H5d is accepted since $\beta = 0.931$, $p < 0.01$; thus, identification mediates the relationship between perceived trustworthiness and purchase intention. The conceptual framework is shown in Figure 2. The findings of the hypothesis testing are shown in Table 5.

Table 4. Hypothesis Analysis

Hypotheses	Path	Coefficient	t value	p-value
H1a	PA→PSR	0.881	33.906	0.000**
H1b	PA→IN	0.886	32.229	0.000**
H1c	PA→PI	0.918	37.520	0.000**
H2a	PE→PSR	0.882	31.302	0.000**
H2b	PE→IN	0.888	29.951	0.000**
H2c	PE→PI	0.920	34.421	0.000**
H3a	PT→PSR	0.885	31.509	0.000**
H3b	PT→IN	0.903	31.626	0.000**
H3c	PT→PI	0.931	35.797	0.000**
H4a	PSR→IN	0.947	47.256	0.000**
H4b	PSR→PI	0.931	42.174	0.000**
H4c	PA→PSR→PI	0.918	37.520	0.000**
H4d	PE→PSR→PI	0.920	34.421	0.000**
H4e	PT→PSR→PI	0.931	35.797	0.000**
H5a	IN→PI	0.909	40.784	0.000**
H5b	PA→IN→PI	0.918	37.520	0.000**
H5c	PE→IN→PI	0.920	34.421	0.000**
H5d	PT→IN→PI	0.931	35.797	0.000**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2. Hypothesized model with results

The outcome of the mediation analysis of PSR and IN, using them as the mediation items within PA, PE, PT, and PI, is shown in Table 5. The total and indirect effects are computed using SPSS 26 and Hayes Process Macro. The indirect effect via PSR was significant since $p < 0.01$, indicating that PSR played a mediation role within PA, PE, and PT, and PI. Also, the indirect effect via IN was significant because $p < 0.01$, presenting that identification took a mediation part between PA and PI, between PE and PI, and between PT and PI. Table 6 presents the outcomes of the hypothesis testing based on the findings.

Path	Effect	Coefficient	SE	t value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI
PA→PSR→PI	Total	0.9181	0.0245	37.5197	0.0000**	0.8700	0.9662
PA→IN→PI	Total	0.9181	0.0245	37.5197	0.0000**	0.8700	0.9662
PA→PSR→IN→PI	Total	0.9181	0.0245	37.5197	0.0000**	0.8700	0.9662
PE→PSR→PI	Total	0.9203	0.0267	34.4209	0.0000**	0.8677	0.9728
PE→IN→PI	Total	0.9203	0.0267	34.4209	0.0000**	0.8677	0.9728
PE→PSR→IN→PI	Total	0.9203	0.0267	34.4209	0.0000**	0.8677	0.9728
PT→PSR→PI	Total	0.9306	0.0260	35.7973	0.0000**	0.8794	0.9817
PT→IN→PI	Total	0.9306	0.0260	35.7973	0.0000**	0.8794	0.9817
PT→PSR→IN→PI	Total	0.9306	0.0260	35.7973	0.0000**	0.8794	0.9817
Indirect effect	Effect	Coefficient	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCL		
PA→PSR→PI	Indirect 1	0.5021	0.0635	0.3786	0.6277		
PA→IN→PI	Indirect 2	0.4748	0.0502	0.3784	0.5767		
PA→PSR→IN→PI	Indirect 3	0.2049	0.0425	0.1214	0.2857		
PE→PSR→PI	Indirect 1	0.5460	0.0739	0.3875	0.6774		
PE→IN→PI	Indirect 2	0.5180	0.0647	0.3884	0.6425		
PE→PSR→IN→PI	Indirect 3	0.2249	0.0427	0.1385	0.3056		
PT→PSR→PI	Indirect 1	0.5263	0.0719	0.3874	0.6700		
PT→IN→PI	Indirect 2	0.5092	0.0623	0.3866	0.6321		
PT→PSR→IN→PI	Indirect 3	0.1923	0.0420	0.1102	0.2741		

Hypothesis	Results
H1a: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.	Supported
H1b: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with followers' identification.	Supported
H1c: Social media influencers' perceived attractiveness is positively associated with purchase intentions.	Supported

H2a: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.	Supported
H2b: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with followers' identification.	Supported
H2c: Social media influencers' perceived expertise is positively associated with purchase intentions.	Supported
H3a: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with para-social relationships with social media influencers.	Supported
H3b: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with followers' identification.	Supported
H3c: Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with purchase intentions.	Supported
H4a: Para-social relationships with social media influencers are positively associated with followers' identification.	Supported
H4b: Para-social relationships with social media influencers are positively associated with followers' purchase intentions.	Supported
H4c: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions.	Supported
H4d: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived expertise and purchase intentions.	Supported
H4e: Para-social relationships with social media influencers mediate the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.	Supported
H5a: Followers' identification is positively associated with followers' purchase intentions.	Supported
H5b: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions.	Supported

H5c: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived expertise and purchase intentions.	Supported
H5d: Followers' identification mediates the relationship between social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness and purchase intentions.	Supported

6 Conclusion & Implications

6.1 Conclusion and Discussion

This paper demonstrated that perceived attractiveness (PA), perceived expertise (PE), and perceived trustworthiness (PT) positively influence para-social relationship (PSR) (Zhang, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020), identification (IN) (Le & Hancer, 2021), and purchase intention (PI) (Pornpitaipan, 2004; Ismagilova, 2020; Chekima et al., 2020). Moreover, para-social relationships are factors explaining identification and purchase intention. This discovery confirms the findings of Wahab et al. (2022) that para-social relationships between followers and social media influencers have an important influence on followers' decision-making process. Also, this research found a positive impact of followers' identification on their purchase intentions, which coincides with previous findings (Wahab et al., 2022).

We explored the mediation of the para-social relationship in the relationship between social media influencers' perceived attractiveness and purchase intentions, demonstrating that followers develop perceived intimate relationships with social media influencers who are attractive and classy, which consequently brings followers pleasant customer experiences and triggers their purchase intentions. Additionally, we investigated that PSR moderates the relationship between PE, PT, and PI. Similar results are validated by Masuda et al. (2022), that para-social interaction was a conduct that occurred in conjunction with para-social relationships and that social media fashion bloggers' credibility is linked to purchase intention. This finding also agrees with the study of Kim et al. (2015), who reported that customers desire to wear the same fashion ornaments as celebrities. Our study also explored that followers' identification moderates the relationships between social media influencers' characteristics and purchase intentions. Customers who find an influencer's image appealing may want to emulate the influencer and improve their ideal self-image by utilizing and buying the product the influencer has recommended (Shan et al., 2020).

6.2 Implications

6.2.1 Theoretical Implications

This paper makes a number of theoretical contributions. First, prior scholars primarily focused on celebrity endorsement (Ahmed et al., 2015; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Escalas & Bettman, 2009). We apply CIM to the influencer endorsement context by exposing the impact of social media influencers' characteristics on para-social relationships, identification, and followers' purchase intentions in the Chinese setting. Increased incomes in China are developing a wealthy middle class with educated and affluent customers; therefore, the price is no longer the only factor influencing purchases (Nanevi et al., 2022). Chinese customers are more willing to purchase if a product is talked about favorably on social media platforms.

Second, participants' data help to understand Chinese Generation Z's preferences on social media influencers' characteristics. Scholars can choose the appropriate variables to use when analyzing the effects of various source credibility factors on customers' purchasing behavior. Third, the conceptual model combined with SCM and CIM provides a new perspective for social media influencer marketing in the FMCG sector. This combination provides a better understanding of the relationship between social media influencers' characteristics and purchase intention.

6.2.2 Managerial Implications

This study also provides some managerial implications. First, the research results will remind marketers that they should take into account the different characteristics of social media influencers when creating their product promotion strategy in terms of perceived attractiveness, perceived expertise, and perceived trustworthiness. Then, companies, especially in the FMCG sector, are adequate to promote their products through social media influencers' endorsement in the Chinese market.

Third, it is vital for marketers to think about developing a relationship with brand-loyal customers. The para-social relationship is helpful in enhancing marketing effectiveness. The research results will help marketers to exploit the impact of para-social relationships on purchase intention. Social media influencers should be considered by managers not only as a potent source of brand profitability but also as a way to establish and preserve a dependable bond with consumers (Leite & Baptista, 2022).

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Future studies should address the limitations of our investigation. Our results are only valid in the Chinese context, and future researchers could broaden the use of our concept to the western context. Due to the significant variations between the consumer cultures and target audiences in the U.S. and China, these two countries use highly distinct marketing strategies. For example, U.S. marketers place more

emphasis on a product's usability, while Chinese marketers place more emphasis on a brand name (Nanevi et al., 2022). Second, future scholars can Further subdivide the characteristics of social media influencers used in this study. Qualification, sociability, competence, dynamism, and other celebrity-related attributes can all be used to judge a source's credibility (Zhang, 2018). Third, future studies can conduct comparative research across different product categories within the FMCG sector.

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