

Examining the Impact of Influencer Attributes on Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention: A PLS Path Modeling Approach

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ABSTRACT

Using social media influencers (SMIs) for marketing has become increasingly popular among brands as a way to expand their reach and connect with a broader audience. In this study, we investigate the influence of perceived authenticity, attractiveness, and informativeness on the content, purchase intention, and brand awareness of Moroccan SMIs, with trust serving as a mediating factor. We employed a research model with six specific hypotheses, utilizing PLS path modeling and 30 validated metrics from the existing literature to test these relationships rigorously. We surveyed 291 Moroccan consumers who follow at least one SMI. We found that both the attractiveness and informativeness of SMIs' content impact trust, which in turn

influences purchase intention for the advertised product or service. However, perceived authenticity does not significantly impact trust in SMI content. A k-means clustering analysis was conducted on our respondents, yielding exciting patterns regarding SMIs' ability to influence purchase intention.

Keywords: Social media influencer, Trust, Perceived authenticity, Informativeness, PLS path modeling, Unsupervised machine learning

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an essential tool for marketers to promote products, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter boasting billions of users worldwide. With the growth of these platforms, the number of social media influencers (SMIs) has increased substantially. In the marketing literature, SMIs are commonly described as independent third-party communicators who shape audience attitudes and behaviors through content shared on blogs, microblogs, and other social media channels (Hudders et al., 2021). These individuals have amassed a significant following, enabling them to promote products and brands to a large audience. Influencers may receive free products from brands in exchange for a mention in one of their posts, or they may be paid to create a sponsored post or video directed at their followers (De Veirman et al., 2019). Influencer marketing has become a popular form of advertising for companies looking to reach a younger, more digitally engaged audience.

Despite the growing body of research on the impact of social media influencers on consumer behavior, the literature remains divergent, partial, and fragmented (Vrontis et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it is well established that consumers are more likely to purchase a product if it is endorsed by an influencer they follow, especially if the influencer is perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy (Schouten et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Other studies suggest that influencer advertising is more effective in driving sales when the product is related to the influencer's area of expertise (Trivedi & Sama, 2020).

Other research has explored the factors contributing to the credibility of influencer content (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Stubb et al., 2019). Prior studies indicate that the degree of transparency and disclosure in sponsored content, together with the perceived fit between the influencer and the brand, significantly shapes consumers' attitudes (Breves et al., 2019; De Veirman & Hu). It is worth noting that an extensive review of SMI marketing is beyond the scope of this paper; interested readers can refer to the systematic review by Vrontis et al. (2021) for further information. Several papers have examined the use of social media influencers in Morocco for digital marketing. One study interviewed five anonymous travel influencers regarding the effectiveness of their partnerships, as well as other factors related to promoting travel destinations (El Yaagoubi & Machrafi, 2021). In a related study, Fouad and Bennani (2022) interviewed

four Moroccan brand representatives, who described how they choose suitable influencers to support sales objectives. Other research has examined the impact of influencers on corporate reputation (Fouad & Bennani, 2022). Another study examined the impact of influencers on companies' reputations (Chiny et al., 2021). In that study, a survey was administered to 180 respondents to assess the effects of a specific SMI campaign on a Moroccan telecommunications company.

This paper begins with a brief literature review of the various constructs in our conceptual framework. We then introduce the conceptual model, research hypotheses, and the methodology employed for data collection. Next, we present the results of our empirical study. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings and propose directions for future research.

Theoretical Grounding in Source Credibility and Trust Transfer

Drawing on Source Credibility Theory and Trust Transfer Theory, we conceptualize the relationships among the core constructs in our model. Source Credibility Theory posits that message receivers evaluate a communicator based on dimensions such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, which collectively determine the effectiveness of persuasion. In the context of SMIs, entertainment value and informativeness capture, respectively, the affective and cognitive facets of how followers experience the influencer's content. Informativeness reflects the extent to which posts provide diagnostic and useful information that supports rational evaluation, whereas entertainment value reflects hedonic engagement and a positive affective response. In contrast, perceived authenticity reflects a more ethical or value-based evaluation of the influencer, linked to perceived sincerity, integrity, and self-congruence between the influencer and their content. Building on Trust Transfer Theory, we assume that when followers evaluate these content-related attributes (cognitive, affective, and ethical), the resulting trust in SMI content can be transferred to the advertised brands and, ultimately, to purchase-related outcomes. Our conceptual framework, therefore, treats entertainment value and informativeness as cognitive/affective antecedents of trust, and perceived authenticity as an ethical/value-based antecedent of trust, which in turn shapes brand awareness and purchase intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Role of Trust in SMI-Sponsored Posts and Its Impact on Consumer Behavior

The concept of trust has long been recognized as a critical factor in the relationship between consumers and brands. Trust is defined as the belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something (Rousseau et al., 1998). Studies have

shown that SMIs earn the trust of most of their followers. For example, one study found that 92% of social media users trust SMI marketing over traditional marketing channels (Eyal, 2018). This trust serves as the cornerstone of the influencer-follower relationship (Brooks & Piskorski, 2018). Influencers can foster trust and loyalty among their followers by consistently engaging with them and meeting their expectations. This is reflected in positive engagement metrics such as views, likes, and comments (D.Y. Kim & H.Y. Kim, 2021).

Trust in an influencer can significantly impact how a follower perceives and behaves toward a product or service. Research has shown that when consumers trust an influencer, they tend to view the products or services they recommend more favorably, leading to a positive impact on purchase intention (D.Y. Kim & H.Y. Kim, 2021). Consumers' trust in an influencer can be influenced by various factors, including the influencer's perceived credibility, expertise, and attractiveness (Lou et al., 2019). For example, an influencer with a strong reputation for providing valuable and accurate information is more likely to be perceived as credible by consumers. However, research has shown that when consumers perceive an influencer to be dishonest or insincere, their trust in the influencer can be severely eroded (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Additionally, sponsorship disclosures can make consumers suspect that an influencer's endorsement is driven solely by financial gain. In such cases, they are less likely to trust the influencer and view the endorsement as credible (Vrontis et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to note that trust is not a static construct, since it can change over time.

The Role of Informativeness and Entertainment Value in SMI Content

The rise of SMIs has led to a substantial increase in the content produced and consumed by social media users. As a result, there is growing interest in understanding the marketing value of this content, particularly in terms of its informativeness and entertainment value. It has been established in the literature that critical factors related to social media advertising—namely, informativeness and entertainment—have a positive impact on consumers' perceived value of social media ads, leading to an increase in their intention to make an online purchase (Van-Tien Dao et al., 2014).

Entertainment value captures a content's ability to satisfy audiences' needs for emotional release, distraction, and pleasure. It also motivates them to share information and experiences with their social network (Y. Kim et al., 2011; Muntinga et al., 2011). Social media influencers often rely on entertaining content to gain and maintain a large following. One study asked participants about the main reasons they follow their favorite influencers; among those reasons was the pursuit of entertainment (Taillon et al., 2020). High entertainment value can be achieved through various means, such as humor, comedy, storytelling, and relatable topics. If a brand's post is generally

entertaining, it will encourage followers to engage with the shared content. As a result, followers may develop a more positive attitude toward entertaining brand posts, leading to higher popularity than non-entertaining posts (De Vries et al., 2012).

In terms of informativeness, it refers to the ability to provide users with information about product alternatives, enabling them to make choices that yield the highest value (Rotzoll et al., 1996). Informativeness is a perceived construct, evaluated through self-reported items (Pavlou et al., 2007). It also encompasses rational appeal, as it helps consumers make informed decisions about whether to accept a message (Lee & Hong, 2016). SMIs often share their personal experiences and knowledge on specific topics, thereby providing valuable information to their followers. This information, often in the form of product reviews, is more influential than traditional celebrity endorsements, as it is perceived to be both more authentic and accessible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Such content can be particularly precious for individuals seeking guidance and inspiration.

There is a positive correlation between the informative nature of advertisements and both purchase intention and brand awareness (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020). Therefore, the potential for informative influencer content to increase brand awareness and conversions is significant. It has been demonstrated that social media posts containing informational content have a positive effect on followers' engagement behavior, such as increasing likes and shares (Dolan et al., 2019). Consequently, if an influencer's post is informative and generates high engagement, it has a greater likelihood of appearing in users' feeds through organic recommendation algorithms, leading to even more brand exposure.

Authenticity of SMI Content and Brand Awareness

In SMI, authenticity is defined as any social media content, whether a post or photo, that demonstrates some aspect of the influencer's true self (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Numerous studies have explored the role of authenticity in SMI marketing. One study found that over 80% of SMIs rely on their authenticity when delivering messages (Moore et al., 2018). A key finding reported by Glucksman (2017) suggests that authenticity may be more crucial than follower count in determining an SMI's success in fostering a connection between followers and a brand. Authenticity is an essential aspect of influencer ethics, playing a significant role in shaping industry conversations and decisions related to sponsored content (Wellman et al., 2020). This connection is vital for promoting products or services, as followers are more likely to purchase if they trust the influencer's endorsement.

Brands are beginning to recognize the importance of authenticity in sponsored content. They empower SMIs to create brand-related content that is authentic, unique,

and true to their own style, while still aligning with the brand's goals (Vrontis et al., 2021). This approach allows the content to resonate with the audience while maintaining brand integrity. In their systematic review of the SMI marketing phenomenon, Vrontis et al. (2021) suggested that future research should focus on the impact of variables such as authenticity on persuasion outcomes. This recommendation served as the motivation for our study, which investigates the influence of SMI content authenticity on purchase intention, using trust and brand awareness as mediators.

Brand awareness refers to the extent to which consumers recognize and recall a brand when considering a specific product. It is essential for effective communication and establishing a strong presence in consumers' minds (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). A study by Owyang et al. (2011) demonstrated that influencers can effectively increase both brand awareness and purchase intention.

Research by Booth and Matic (2011) indicates that using SMI marketing can lead to measurable and positive impacts on brand equity, which encompasses brand awareness. This finding suggests that SMIs can positively influence the growth of brand awareness, thereby establishing a strong relationship between the two variables. In this study, we employ trust as a mediator between the authenticity of SMI content and brand awareness.

Purchase Intention in SMI Marketing

Purchase intention refers to the likelihood that a consumer will buy a specific product or service. This concept has been extensively examined in the literature, which shows that factors such as brand awareness, perceived quality, and product features can all influence purchase intention. As previously noted, SMI (Social Media Influencer) marketing is a strategy that leverages individuals with substantial followings on social media platforms to endorse and recommend products or services to their audience.

Among the antecedents of purchase intention within the context of SMI marketing, factors like credibility (Breves et al., 2019), attractiveness (Torres et al., 2019), and several other significant variables have been studied. The relationship between attractiveness and purchase intention has also been explored, with brand attitude and brand admiration serving as mediators (Trivedi & Sama, 2020). Attitude toward the endorsement has been considered another mediator (Torres et al., 2019). In our study, we employ trust in SMI content as the mediating variable.

SMI Marketing: Emerging Trends, Technologies, and Consumer Engagement

The integration of social media influencers (SMIs) into digital marketing strategies has gained significant attention, particularly in engaging Generation Z consumers. Generation Z, being inherently tech-oriented, relies extensively on social media

platforms like Instagram for brand information, and their trust in SMI substantially enhances marketing effectiveness (Dwiandini, 2024). Similarly, AlKoheji et al. (2023) have examined the impact of SMIs on purchase intentions, concluding that influencer credibility factors—such as attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness—positively influence consumer purchase decisions.

Emerging trends in social media marketing underscore the critical role of technology in shaping influencer marketing strategies. Research highlights that Instagram has become a key tool for digital marketing, with increasing interest in user behaviors and motivations when deciding on brands (León-Alberca et al., 2024). The proliferation of platforms like TikTok and the varying engagement metrics across different social media channels necessitate a nuanced approach to influencer marketing. Key performance indicators (KPIs) of influencers across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter reveal differences in engagement patterns, underscoring the importance of platform-specific strategies (Pourazad et al., 2023).

Technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and blockchain are emerging as influential factors in social media marketing. While social media marketing has garnered significant scholarly attention worldwide, few studies have examined how disruptive technologies, such as AI and ML, are being adopted in influencer marketing and how they impact its outcomes (Bashar et al., 2024). The need for businesses to regularly update and adapt marketing strategies to keep pace with technological advancements and changing consumer behaviors is also emphasized. This emphasis includes leveraging content marketing, influencer marketing, and search engine optimization as effective tactics in the digital age.

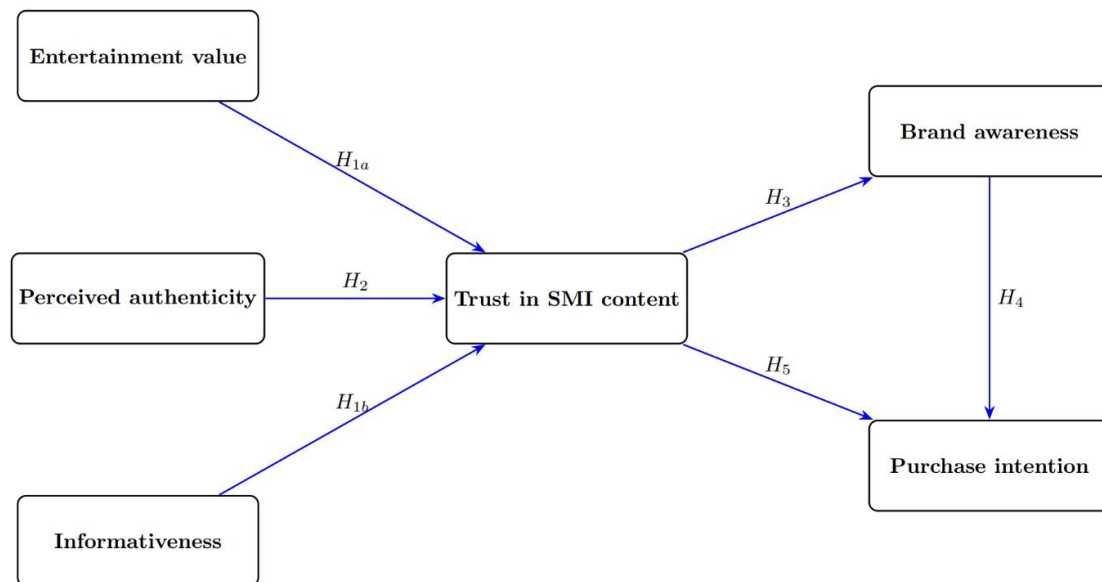
Furthermore, social media influencers are not only shaping consumer preferences but also promoting sustainable consumption practices. Influencers significantly impact sustainable consumer behavior through their credibility and the way they communicate with their audience, as shown by Vilkaite-Vaitone (2024). This highlights how SMIs are evolving from brand promoters into agents of change that shape societal values and consumption patterns.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on our preceding literature review, this study tests several hypotheses. We employ some of the variables from the conceptual model presented by Lou et al. (2019), augmenting them with the variable of perceived authenticity of SMI content. The aim is to assess its influence on both purchase intention and brand awareness, mediated by trust in SMI content (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, entertainment value (H1a), informativeness (H1b), and perceived authenticity (H2) are modeled as antecedents of trust in SMI content, which in turn predicts brand awareness (H3) and purchase

intention (H4). Brand awareness is also modeled as a direct predictor of purchase intention (H5).

Figure 1 Conceptual model used in our study.



Conceptually, entertainment value and informativeness are treated as cognitive and affective drivers of how followers evaluate SMI content, whereas perceived authenticity captures an ethical and value-based evaluation of the influencer. All three are modeled as distinct antecedents of trust in SMI content, which then transmits their effects to brand awareness and purchase intention.

The hypotheses to be tested, according to our conceptual framework, are as follows:

H₁: *The perceived value of SMI content, in terms of both entertainment and informativeness, positively impacts followers' trust.*

The sub-hypotheses of H_1 are :

H_{1a}: *The entertainment value of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust.*

The entertainment value of content is a well-established concept in media research, particularly in relation to audience engagement and trust-building. According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973), individuals seek media that fulfill their needs, including entertainment. This theory supports the notion that entertaining content not only captures attention but also enhances the user experience, fostering a stronger sense of trust in the content creator, such as a social media influencer (SMI).

Furthermore, research underscores the link between entertainment and trust. Agnihotri et al. (2023) found that attributes of authenticity, which can include entertaining content, positively influence followers' buying behavior. While the study focuses on authenticity, it emphasizes that entertainment plays a role in shaping perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness.

In addition, Bashar et al. (2024) highlight the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies that incorporate engaging and entertaining content. Their findings suggest that content marketing, particularly when it incorporates entertainment elements, is more effective in influencing consumer behavior in the digital environment. Thus, the development of this hypothesis is rooted in both theoretical foundations and empirical evidence. By integrating insights from well-established theories and recent studies, the hypothesis that the entertainment value of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust is strongly supported.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that entertaining content does more than simply capture attention: it signals goodwill, effort, and relational investment from the influencer. When followers repeatedly experience SMI content as enjoyable and emotionally engaging, they are more likely to infer that the influencer is acting in their interest, which strengthens trust in their sponsored posts.

H_{1b}: The informativeness of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust in the content.

Informativeness is a key factor in establishing credibility and trust with followers. The existing literature underscores the importance of informative content in building credibility, as users tend to trust content they perceive as valuable and reliable. The Knowledge Adoption Model (Sussman & Siegal, 2003) supports this by positing that users evaluate the usefulness of information, which subsequently shapes their trust in the source.

Empirical studies further support this hypothesis. Agnihotri et al. (2023) highlight that truthful endorsement—an aspect of informativeness—plays a significant role in influencing followers' purchase behavior, mediated by parasocial interaction. Their research suggests that when content provides valuable information, it enhances trust and encourages consumers to take action.

Moreover, Pourazad et al. (2023) examine key performance indicators (KPIs) of influencers across multiple platforms and find that informative content is associated with higher engagement rates, which can be linked to increased trust in the influencer. This relationship highlights the vital importance of informativeness in cultivating trust and fostering deeper connections between influencers and their audiences.

The hypothesis that the informativeness of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust is therefore well-supported by both theoretical frameworks and recent empirical evidence, establishing a solid foundation for this aspect of the study.

The two sub-hypotheses—entertainment value and informativeness—are treated as dimensions of the broader concept of "perceived value" in SMI content. Both factors contribute to how followers evaluate the overall quality and relevance of the content, but they address different aspects of this value. Entertainment captures the emotional engagement and enjoyment followers experience, while informativeness reflects the practical utility and credibility of the content. Together, they form a comprehensive measure of content value, where both dimensions are essential to understanding how SMIs foster trust among their audience.

Conceptually, informative posts reduce uncertainty about products and the influencer's motives by providing detailed, helpful information, which demonstrates competence and transparency. This combination of perceived expertise and openness makes it easier for followers to judge the influencer as a trustworthy source of recommendations, thereby reinforcing trust in sponsored content.

H₂: The perceived authenticity of SMI content has a positive impact on followers' trust.

Authenticity plays a critical role in establishing trust between influencers and their followers, especially in the context of social media. Research consistently highlights the positive relationship between perceived authenticity and trust. Agnihotri et al. (2023) found that authenticity attributes of social media influencers significantly influence followers' purchase behavior, with authenticity fostering trust through parasocial interactions.

Furthermore, Safeer et al. (2023) explored the impact of perceived brand authenticity on consumer behavior among Generation Y in Asia, concluding that authenticity dimensions positively affect emotional connection with brands, which subsequently influences consumer outcomes, such as continuous purchase intentions and willingness to pay a premium. Similarly, Zniva et al. (2023) demonstrated that authenticity-related elements, including influencers' uniqueness and consistency, have a significant impact on trust and purchase intentions.

Andonopoulos et al. (2023) further examined the complexity of this relationship, finding that while authenticity generally increases trust and inspiration, even inauthentic influencers can inspire purchase intentions under certain conditions, illustrating the nuanced ways in which authenticity influences trust and inspiration.

Finally, Vilkaite-Vaitone (2024) emphasized the role of influencers' credibility and authenticity in promoting sustainable consumer behavior, where authentic communication fosters trust, leading to shifts in consumption patterns.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the hypothesis that the perceived authenticity of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust is robustly supported.

From a theoretical standpoint, authenticity acts as an ethical and value-based signal that the influencer is consistent, sincere, and not solely driven by commercial gain. When followers perceive an influencer as authentic, they are more likely to believe that the content reflects genuine opinions rather than purely transactional endorsements, which should, in principle, translate into higher levels of trust in the influencer's sponsored posts.

H₃: Trust in SMI content positively impacts followers' awareness of advertised brands.

The Trust Transfer Theory suggests that trust in one entity can be transferred to another related entity (Stewart, 2003), implying that trust in a social media influencer (SMI) can increase consumers' confidence in the brands they endorse. Agnihotri et al. (2023) support this idea by demonstrating that trust in an influencer, developed through authenticity and parasocial interactions, positively affects followers' purchase behavior, indicating that trust in the influencer also fosters engagement with the advertised brands.

Further research by Zniva et al. (2023) reveals that influencer authenticity influences purchase intention through both brand authenticity and brand attitude. Trust in the influencer strengthens the perceived authenticity of the brand, which in turn increases brand awareness and fosters more positive attitudes toward it.

The relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention is well-documented in marketing literature. The Hierarchy of Effects Model (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) posits that brand awareness is the first step in the progression toward a purchase decision. Safeer et al. (2023) found that perceived brand authenticity positively influences brand love, which subsequently affects continuous purchase intention. In other words, increased trust leads to more sustained purchasing behavior.

Moreover, Massi et al. (2023) showed that seamless omnichannel experiences enhance perceptions of brand authenticity and increase purchase intentions, underscoring the importance of maintaining consistent brand awareness across channels to drive purchase decisions.

This hypothesis is thus strongly supported by both theoretical models and empirical evidence, reinforcing the link between brand awareness and purchase intention in the context of influencer marketing.

Conceptually, trust reduces the psychological distance between followers and the brands featured in SMI posts. When followers trust the content, they are more attentive to brand-related cues and more willing to integrate these brands into their consideration set, which naturally increases brand recognition and recall.

H4: Followers' awareness of advertised brands positively impacts their purchase intention.

The relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention is well-established in marketing literature. According to the Hierarchy of Effects Model (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961), brand awareness is the first step in the process that leads to a purchase decision. Increased brand awareness is often linked with higher purchase intentions, as greater familiarity with a brand leads to more favorable consumer attitudes.

Empirical studies further support this connection. Safeer et al. (2023) demonstrated that perceived brand authenticity positively influences brand love, which in turn drives continuous purchase intention. This connection suggests that increased awareness, coupled with a positive perception of the brand, enhances purchase intentions. Similarly, Massi et al. (2023) found that seamless omnichannel experiences enhance perceptions of brand authenticity, which in turn strengthens purchase intentions. This enhancement highlights the importance of consistent brand awareness across different channels in shaping consumer purchasing behavior.

In other words, once a brand becomes salient and familiar through repeated, trusted exposure, the perceived risk associated with purchase decreases, and the brand is more likely to be chosen over less familiar alternatives. Brand awareness thus operates as a cognitive shortcut that nudges consumers toward purchase in cluttered digital environments.

H5: Followers' trust in SMI content positively impacts their purchase intention.

Trust is a significant determinant of purchase intention, particularly in online contexts. According to Trust Theory and its extensions into online behavior, higher trust leads to an increased willingness to engage in transactions. Agnihotri et al. (2023) demonstrated that trust in social media influencers (SMIs), developed through authenticity and parasocial interactions, has a positive influence on followers' purchase behavior. Their study highlights that trust acts as a key mediator between influencer attributes and consumer actions.

Similarly, Zniva et al. (2023) found that influencer authenticity has a substantial impact on purchase intention, mediated by brand authenticity and attitude. Trust in the influencer transfers to the brand, enhancing both brand trust and purchase intentions.

From a decision-making perspective, trust functions as a mechanism that compensates for information asymmetry in online environments. When followers trust an influencer's content, they are more willing to rely on the influencer's evaluations instead of conducting extensive independent research, which increases their willingness to act on recommendations and, ultimately, to purchase the advertised products or services.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Sampling and Survey

The primary objective of our study is to examine how social media users perceive and interact with sponsored posts from Social Media Influencers (SMIs). Data were collected through an online survey targeted at social media users who follow at least one well-known influencer. The questionnaire is divided into two sections: the first section comprises measurements of each construct in our conceptual framework, using a Likert scale with the following options: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The second section includes general questions designed to describe the respondent population. To test the hypotheses, we used Partial Least Squares Path Modeling (PLS-PM) and an unsupervised machine learning algorithm to gain deeper insight into the structure of the respondent population. A total of 291 valid responses were collected.

All measurement items (Table 1) were adapted from established scales in advertising and brand-related research to fit the context of SMI-sponsored posts. Specifically, we selected items that capture hedonic (entertainment), utilitarian (informativeness), authenticity-related, trust-related, brand awareness, and purchase intention constructs that have been widely used and validated in prior studies. Item wording was minimally adjusted to explicitly reference "the influencer you follow" and "sponsored posts" on social media, while preserving the original semantic content and factor structure. This approach ensures conceptual equivalence with the source scales, while enhancing content validity for the specific context of influencer advertising.

Table 1 *Constructs, Measurement Items, and Literature Sources*

Construct	Item	Source
Informativeness	Ineffective/ Effective.	Voss et al. (2003)
	Unhelpful/Helpful.	
	Not functional/Functional.	
	Unnecessary/Necessary.	
	Impractical/Practical.	
Entertainment value	Not fun/Fun.	Voss et al. (2003).
	Dull/Exciting.	
	Not delightful/Delightful.	
	Unenjoyable/Enjoyable.	
Perceived authenticity	I believe that the more followers an influencer has, the less authentic their recommendations are	Abreu, R. (2019).
	I believe that influencers' recommendations are trustworthy when they receive a sample product from a company to test or review, but are not being paid to promote it.	
	I believe that influencers' recommendations are more trustworthy when they are not being sponsored by the brand they are recommending.	
Trust in SMI content	Dishonest/honest.	Wu and Lin (2017)
	Untrustworthy/trustworthy.	
	Unethical/ethical.	
	Phony/ genuine.	
	Unreliable/reliable.	
	Insincere/sincere.	
	Not convincing/convincing.	
	Not credible/credible.	
	Unreasonable/ reasonable.	
	Questionable/unquestionable.	
Brand awareness	Not authentic/authentic.	Yoo et al. (2000)
	I can recognize X among other competing brands.	
	I am aware of X.	
	Some characteristics of X come to my mind quickly.	
	I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of X.	
Purchase intention	I have become aware of a new brand/product through an Influencer that I follow.	Abreu, R. (2019)
	I have felt more confident about buying a product after seeing an Influencer that I follow recommending/using it.	

Statistical Analysis

The choice of Partial Least Squares Path Modeling (Wold, 1980) over Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) is grounded in several key methodological considerations. First, PLS-PM is well-suited for exploratory research and theory development, making it an appropriate choice for this study, which seeks to investigate relatively new and evolving phenomena—namely, the impact of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on consumer behavior. PLS-PM does not assume a specific distribution and is robust with smaller sample sizes, which fits our sample of 291 respondents. In contrast, CB-SEM typically requires larger sample sizes to obtain reliable estimates and assumes multivariate normality, which would be more restrictive given the variability in the data.

Moreover, PLS-PM is flexible in handling complex models with many indicators and latent variables, allowing a more comprehensive analysis of the relationships between SMIs, consumer attitudes, and behaviors. While CB-SEM is effective for testing well-established theories with strong measurement models, the relative novelty of this research domain makes PLS-PM more appropriate, because it focuses on maximizing explained variance in the dependent variables rather than prioritizing overall model fit, as CB-SEM does.

The PLS-PM method is employed to estimate two distinct types of models: the inner model, which calculates causal relationships between latent variables based on pre-established links, and the outer model, which estimates the connections between manifest variables and their related latent variables (Abdelmounaim, 2020). Additionally, we utilized the chi-square test to assess the impact of socio-demographic and behavioral variables on purchase intention, specifically in the context of SMI advertising. Lastly, we sought to cluster our respondents using the unsupervised machine learning algorithm, K-means, to better understand differing patterns of behavior concerning SMI advertising.

After estimating the PLS-PM model and obtaining latent variable scores, we estimated the structural relations using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. For each endogenous latent variable, we regressed its score on the scores of its antecedent constructs. We then assessed the significance of each structural path using the t-statistics and p-values from these OLS regressions.

Results

We used Cronbach's Alpha (AC) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) as measures of reliability. The AC values ranged between 0.559 and 0.935, as shown in Table 2. The accepted threshold for this measure is 0.7, with most of our constructs exceeding this value.

The only construct with an alpha below 0.70 was perceived authenticity ($\alpha = 0.559$). We retained this construct for two reasons. First, it was measured with only three items and is theoretically multifaceted (capturing both skepticism about sponsorship and perceived genuineness), which typically reduces alpha despite acceptable underlying reliability. Second, its AVE reached the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity in an exploratory, theory-building study. In line with recommendations for PLS-PM in early-stage research, we therefore treat the authenticity results as tentative and interpret them with appropriate caution.

Table 2 *Evaluation of the Measurement Model*

Construct	Item	PLS Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
Informativeness	IN1	0.812	0.863	0.646
	IN2	0.828		
	IN3	0.828		
	IN4	0.732		
	IN5	0.814		
Entertainment value	EV1	0.796	0.844	0.68
	EV2	0.861		
	EV3	0.829		
	EV4	0.811		
Perceived authenticity	PA	0.395	0.559	0.5
	PA	0.898		
	PA	0.734		
Trust in SMI content	TR1	0.513	0.935	0.545
	TR2	0.586		
	TR3	0.81		
	TR4	0.777		
	TR5	0.735		
	TR6	0.789		
	TR7	0.744		
	TR8	0.751		
	TR9	0.746		
	TR10	0.801		
	TR11	0.804		
Brand awareness	BA1	0.654	0.621	0.843
	BA2	0.701		
	BA3	0.801		
	BA4	0.761		
Purchase intention	PI1	0.920	0.877	0.535
	PI2	0.915		

Regarding AVE, all constructs surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.5, as detailed in Table 2. A descriptive summary of each variable is presented in Table 3 to assess local tendencies and the dispersion of responses.

Table 3 *Statistical Summary of Each Variable Separately*

	Number of items	Mean	Standard deviation
Informativeness	5	2.96	1.21
Entertainment value	4	3.08	1.17
Perceived authenticity	3	3.13	1.33
Trust in sponsored SMI content	11	2.64	1.04
Brand awareness	4	3.34	1.14
Purchase intention	2	3.19	1.37

In our study, 41.9% of respondents were female, and 58.1% were male, as shown in Table 4, ensuring a good representation of both genders. The majority of our respondents were 35 years old or younger (90.7%), which is consistent with evidence that millennials spend more time online than older generations. Instagram emerged as the most popular social media platform (46.7%), followed by Facebook and YouTube. Given that most sponsored content is currently found on Instagram, this makes our target population especially relevant, as they predominantly navigate this platform. We also asked respondents if they had purchased a product or service based on an SMI recommendation; 48.8% affirmed they had, highlighting influencers' ability to drive sales through sponsored content.

Table 4 *Socio-Demographic and Social Media Usage Variables*

		n	%
Sex	Male	122	41.9
	female	169	58.1
Age	Less than 24	173	59.5
	Between 24 and 35	91	31.3
	Older than 35	27	9.3
Favorite social media platform	Facebook	66	22.7
	Twitter	16	5.5
	Instagram	136	46.7
	Snapchat	17	5.8
	YouTube	35	12
	Reddit	5	1.7
	Tik Tok	9	3.1
	LinkedIn	7	2.4
Time spent online per day	Not daily	7	2.4
	Less than two hours	51	17.5
	Between 2 and 5 hours	164	56.4
	More than 5 hours	69	23.7

For the analysis, we used R software, specifically the PLSPM package (Sanchez et al., 2013), to estimate the coefficients of the conceptual model, as detailed in Table 5. We used the Goodness of Fit (GoF) coefficient (G. Sanchez, 2013) to assess the overall performance of our model. The value obtained was 0.508, considered a good fit according to Hryniewicz (2022). The loadings of our path model were all greater than 0.7, except for the loading for perceived authenticity, which was 0.7.

Table 5 *Summary of Hypothesis Test Results.*

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	Result
H1a: The entertainment value of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust.	0.25	Supported
H1b: The informativeness of SMI content positively impacts followers' trust.	0.45	
H2: Perceived authenticity positively impacts followers' trust.	0.07	Not Supported
H3: Trust in SMI content has a positive impact on awareness.	0.40	Supported
H4: Trust in SMI content has a positive impact on purchase intention.	0.58	Supported
H5: Brand awareness has a positive impact on purchase intention.	0.40	Supported

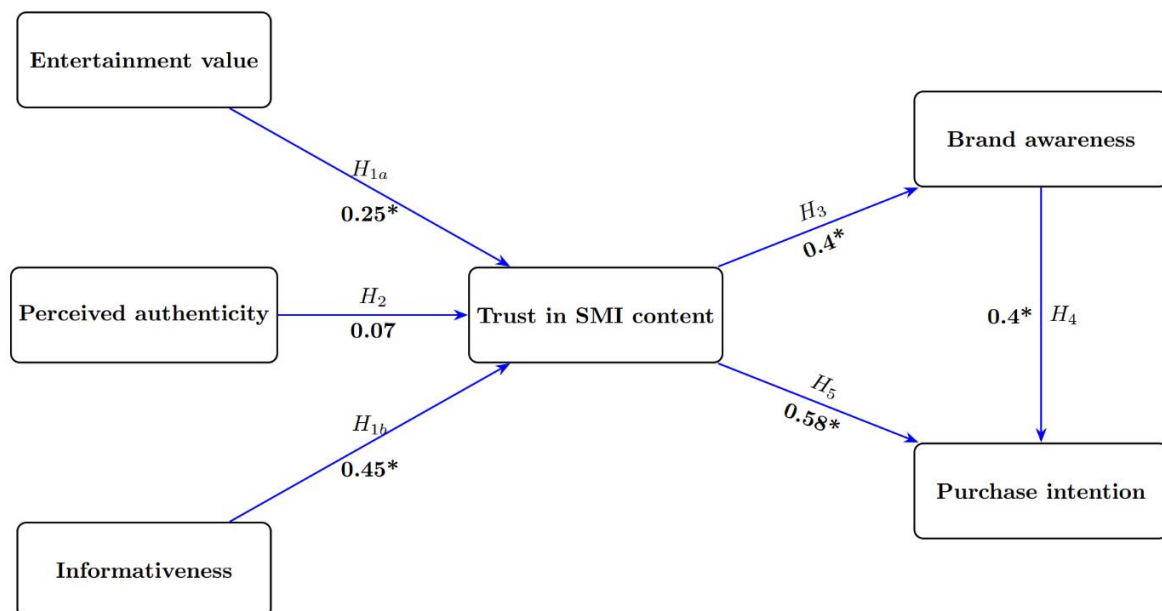
Note. * means that P-Value < 0.05 Indicates Statistical Significance

As detailed in Table 6, the coefficients all yielded significant t-test statistics (p-value < 0.05; Figure 2), except for the coefficient related to the effect of perceived authenticity on trust in SMI content. This finding indicates that the corresponding hypothesis is not supported. Consequently, perceived authenticity does not positively influence consumers' trust in SMI content. However, our study confirmed the significant positive impact of both entertainment value and informativeness on trust in SMI content. Similarly, trust in SMI content was found to have a significantly positive effect on both purchase intention and brand awareness. Brand awareness was also found to have a significant positive effect on purchase intention.

Table 6 Path Coefficients and Their Significance Level.

	Path coefficient	Standard error
Informativeness → trust	0.45*	0.053
Entertainment value → trust	0.25*	0.052
Perceived authenticity → trust	0.07*	0.05
Trust → brand awareness	0.4*	0.053
Trust → purchase intention	0.58*	0.053
Brand awareness → purchase intention	0.4*	0.035

Figure 2 Path Coefficients Shown in the Conceptual Model.)



Note. * means that P-Value < 0.05 Indicates Statistical Significance

A secondary aim of the statistical analysis is to investigate the effects of age, gender, and social media usage patterns on consumers' responses to SMI advertising. Given that SMI advertising has emerged as a prevalent marketing channel, understanding the role

of demographic variables in its efficacy can offer valuable insights for businesses and marketers.

Prior research indicates that these variables influence individuals' receptiveness to advertising. For example, studies indicate that younger people are generally more susceptible to advertising content they encounter on social media platforms, especially when the content conveys an emotional message (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). Additionally, gender differences in attitudes and behaviors toward SMI advertising exist, motivating us to test this hypothesis using a Chi-square independence test.

Both gender and preferred social media platforms exert a significant influence on purchase intention stemming from SMI advertising, as shown in Table 7. However, only age affects whether a consumer has previously purchased a product or service as a result of an SMI advertising recommendation. Interestingly, age did not have a significant impact on purchase intention, nor did gender significantly affect prior purchase history based on SMI advertising. These results are consistent with prior research (Lou et al., 2019), which also found that neither gender nor age significantly influences trust in SMI content, a key mediator of purchase intention.

Table 7 *Results of the Chi-square Test*

	Purchase Intention based on the SMI advertising	Previous verified purchase based on the SMI advertising
Gender	12.622*	6.594
Age	6.27	18.163*
Time spent online	7.36	16.55
Favorite social media platform	39.46*	28.445

Note. *means p-value < 0.05

K-means clustering

K-means clustering (J. A. Hartigan, 1975) is a well-established unsupervised machine learning algorithm. Its objective is to partition a dataset into K homogeneous clusters, each characterized by the mean of its constituent observations. Initially, the algorithm randomly selects K cluster centroids and allocates each data point to the cluster whose centroid is nearest. The algorithm then iteratively updates these centroids and reallocates data points to clusters until convergence is achieved.

The aim of employing this clustering technique is to categorize our respondents into homogeneous groups based on their behavioral patterns toward SMI advertising. In this study, K-means clustering was used as an exploratory post-hoc analysis to identify distinct consumer segments based on demographic and behavioral responses toward influencer advertising. Such categorization can prove invaluable for marketers and

decision-makers in tailoring SMI advertising content to meet the specific needs and interests of each group. The optimal K-means clustering produced three distinct clusters or groups, the details of which are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 *The Details of the 3 K-Means Clusters*

	Sex		Age group			Favorite social media platform	Consumers whom an SMI persuaded to buy a product or service
	Male	Female	< 24	25-35	> 35		
Group 1	59.61 %	40.39 %	38.46 %	46.15 %	15.38 %	Facebook (38.46%)	53.48%
Group 2	41.95 %	58.05 %	62.23 %	30.06 %	5.59 %	Instagram (40.55%)	60.13%
Group 3	32.29 %	67.71 %	66.66 %	25 %	8.33 %	Instagram (64.52%)	77.08%

The group least likely to be influenced by SMI advertising is the first, comprising approximately 60% males and predominantly individuals aged between 25 and 35 (46.15%). The favored social media platform for this group is Facebook, accounting for 38.46%. In contrast, the second and third groups primarily consist of respondents younger than 24 (62.23% and 66.66%, respectively). The majority of the members in these groups are female, and in the third group, women comprise 67.71% of the respondents. Intriguingly, both groups exhibit substantially higher susceptibility to SMI advertising content. Specifically, 60.13% and 77.08% of respondents from the second and third groups, respectively, have acknowledged making a purchase based on an SMI recommendation.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the influence of entertainment value and informativeness in SMI content on Moroccan consumers' purchase intentions and brand awareness, mediated by trust in influencer advertisements. Additionally, the study examines the impact of perceived authenticity in SMI content on purchase intention and brand awareness, also mediated by trust. Furthermore, we investigate the role of demographic variables such as age and gender in consumers' willingness to purchase based on SMI advertising. Lastly, an unsupervised machine learning algorithm is employed to categorize consumers into homogeneous behavioral groups based on their survey responses. The objective of this research is to offer valuable insights for businesses and marketers utilizing SMIs for promotion.

The Conceptual Framework Results

In our conceptual framework, we incorporated perceived authenticity into the model initially studied by Lou et al. (2019), making slight adjustments to align with the focus of our research. This addition aims to contribute to the scholarly conversation on the perceived authenticity of SMIs and their influence on persuasion outcomes, as highlighted in the comprehensive systematic review by Vrontis et al. (2021). Consequently, our findings corroborate the positive impact that both entertainment value and informativeness exert on trust in SMI content, which, in turn, affects both purchase intention and brand awareness. These results echo the prior work by Lou et al. (2019). However, in contrast to our expectations and challenging the findings of Wijerathna and Wijesundara (2022), perceived authenticity did not demonstrate a significant impact on trust in our path model. It is important to note that Wijerathna and Wijesundara's (2022) study focused on micro-influencers in a specific niche (fitness) and was based on 150 survey responses.

One possible interpretation of this non-significant effect is that, in our Moroccan setting, followers may prioritize the informational and entertainment value of SMI content when forming trust, rather than ethical or self-congruent authenticity cues. In an emerging market context where social media feeds are saturated with commercial messages, followers might focus on whether influencer content is helpful, explicit, and engaging enough to justify their limited attention. As long as posts are perceived as valuable and entertaining, followers may tolerate lower levels of perceived authenticity without markedly reducing their trust in the content. This suggests that authenticity may play a more nuanced or context-dependent role than previously assumed, particularly outside micro-influencer niches and in markets where sponsored content is highly prevalent.

Reliability Measures

For reliability measures, we employed Cronbach's alpha as well as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Both measures exceeded the accepted thresholds, underscoring the validity of our instrumentation. To assess the model fit, we relied on the goodness-of-fit index and construct loadings. Except for the loading related to perceived authenticity, all loadings exceeded the 0.7 threshold. The goodness-of-fit index yielded a substantial value of 0.5, further confirming the model's validity.

Impact of Demographics on Purchase Intention in Response to SMI Advertising

In the secondary statistical analysis, we scrutinized the influence of gender, age, and preferred social media platforms on purchase intention and previous purchasing behavior in response to SMI advertising. We employed the chi-square test for this

purpose—a statistical technique commonly used to investigate associations between two categorical variables.

Our findings reveal a significant impact of gender on purchase intention, though it did not notably influence previous purchasing behavior. These results align with existing literature (Ermiş, 2021). Regarding age, our analysis indicated its significant impact on previous purchasing behavior, albeit not on purchase intention. Additionally, our results indicate that respondents' preferred social media platform has a significant effect on their purchase intention.

These insights could be invaluable for marketers aiming to target consumers effectively in their SMI advertising campaigns.

K-means Clustering Result

The k-means clustering analysis delineated three distinct consumer groups with behavioral tendencies toward SMI advertising. The first cluster consisted mainly of male respondents who identified Facebook as their preferred social media platform. Most of these individuals were between the ages of 25 and 35, corroborating earlier research that identifies Facebook as the favored platform among an older demographic (Sheldon et al., 2021). By contrast, the second and third clusters were dominated by female respondents, most of whom were under 24 years old and preferred Instagram.

Behavioral Engagement Across Clusters in Response to SMI Advertising

The behavioral analysis revealed stark differences in engagement levels across the three identified clusters. The third group showed the highest level of engagement, with 77.08% of respondents reporting a previous purchase initiated by SMI advertising. This finding contrasts markedly with the first group, where a lower percentage—53.48%—indicated a purchase based on SMI endorsements. The second group occupied an intermediate position, with 60% of its members reporting a purchase triggered by an SMI advertisement. These outcomes align with the research conducted by Fekete-Farkas et al. (2021), corroborating the influence of age demographics on online purchasing intentions. Specifically, younger consumers exhibit a greater propensity for online shopping compared to their older counterparts.

Implications for SMI Advertising Strategy

The clustering results highlight the importance of considering demographics and platform preferences when designing effective SMI advertising strategies. The differences in engagement across groups suggest that advertisers should tailor SMI campaigns to the target audience's demographic profile (age and gender) and platform preferences to maximize campaign effectiveness.

Managerial Implications

A survey by DigitrendZ found that 75% of Moroccans follow an average of 15 influencers on social media (Sahnouni, 2022). This statistic is why most Moroccan brands nowadays use SMIs to market their products and services. In light of this, marketers and brand owners can use this study's findings to refine their SMI advertising strategies. Consistent with prior literature, they should focus on creating SMI advertisements with strong entertainment and informativeness value. These factors positively impact consumers' trust in the advertised content. This change can be achieved by incorporating humor and storytelling in the sponsored posts. Additionally, presenting valuable information about the promoted product through visuals and infographics can help communicate the message more effectively.

Furthermore, our results on the effects of gender, age, and preferred social media platforms on consumer responses to SMI advertisements can help marketers and brand owners better target the right consumers. By understanding the demographic characteristics and selected social media platforms of each age category, marketers can create and disseminate SMI advertisements that resonate with the target audience and increase the likelihood of influencing their purchase intentions. The k-means clustering results reveal that the study population is divided into three groups, each with distinct behavior patterns toward SMIs' advertisements. Marketers can use this information to create targeted campaigns based on the preferred social media platforms and demographic characteristics of each group. This approach can enhance the impact of SMIs' advertisements and ultimately drive sales for brand owners. A previous study attempted this clustering approach but did not provide much detail about the structure and characteristics of each group (Ebrahimi et al., 2022).

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights for marketers and brand owners on how to utilize SMIs effectively to promote their products. The findings underscore the key factors influencing consumer behavior toward SMIs' advertisements and provide a roadmap for optimizing SMI advertising strategies.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on Social Media Influencers (SMIs) by expanding the theoretical understanding of how the entertainment value and informativeness of SMI content influence consumer behavior. While prior research, such as Lou et al. (2019), has explored these factors, our study provides additional empirical evidence specific to the Moroccan context, which remains underrepresented in the literature. By demonstrating the strong influence of entertainment and informativeness on trust, our research confirms the applicability of

these constructs across various cultural contexts, thereby adding new dimensions to the ongoing discourse in SMI marketing.

By grounding our model in Source Credibility Theory and Trust Transfer Theory, and testing it in an under-researched emerging market, we provide additional evidence on how entertainment value and informativeness function as cognitive and affective drivers of trust in SMI content.

Furthermore, the inclusion of perceived authenticity, inspired by the work of Vrontis et al. (2021), introduces a novel aspect to this framework. While authenticity is crucial in micro-influencer contexts (Wijerathna & Wijesundara, 2022), our findings challenge this notion, revealing that authenticity does not significantly affect trust in a broader influencer context. This result challenges the assumption that authenticity is universally critical across all influencer types, suggesting a need for a more nuanced understanding of how authenticity interacts with other content factors.

Limitations

The results of this study are confined to the Moroccan context and may not generalize well to other countries with different cultural and economic backgrounds. Additionally, while the sample size of 291 respondents is appropriate for this study's objectives, its representativeness should be noted. The sample consists of Moroccan consumers who follow at least one SMI, with a slight skew towards younger age groups (59.5% under 24) and a higher proportion of female participants (58.1%). This demographic composition may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population, particularly to older individuals or those who are not actively engaged in social media. Future research could benefit from a more diversified sample to better capture the full spectrum of Moroccan consumers.

The study relied on self-reported data, which introduces potential biases (Rosenman et al., 2011). Respondents may overreport or underreport their behaviors, which can affect the accuracy of the findings. Future studies could use behavioral measures, such as actual purchase records, to validate these results.

This research was conducted at a specific point in time, which raises uncertainty regarding how the findings might evolve. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial in assessing the persistence of these effects over time.

In addition, the perceived authenticity construct exhibited a Cronbach's alpha slightly below the conventional 0.70 threshold, which suggests that future work could refine the measurement of authenticity dimensions in SMI contexts and test their effects using larger, more diversified samples.

Lastly, the general focus on SMIs across various product categories leaves room for future studies to explore specific products or market niches, which may yield

different results. While this study offers valuable insights into the role of SMIs in Morocco, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the limitations mentioned above. Further research is needed to confirm and extend these results across different settings and populations.

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