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Liuzhi Yang

THE FINAL MASTER'S THESIS (PROJECT)

Nuomonės formuotojo ir darbuotojo ambasadoriaus komunikacijos žinutės įtaka ketinimui pirkti produktus	Influencer and Employee Ambassador Communication Message Influence on Intention to Buy Products

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Name, surname, academic title, scientific degree of the supervisor

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SUMMARY

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Nuomonės formuotojo ir darbuotojo ambasadoriaus komunikacijos žinutės įtaka ketinimui pirkti produktus

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This thesis tackles a pivotal point within social commerce, the social commerce employment of influencers versus the social commerce employment of employee-ambassadors, and the social commerce lack of clarity regarding the influence of source type and message quality on consumers' intention to purchase. A primary aim of this thesis was to operationalise a proposed integrated SCT–ELM–TPB–S-O-R model, where the stimuli of message credibility and the quality of arguments influence (a) brand trust, (b) attitude toward the message, and (c) perceived authenticity, which, in turn, predict purchase intention. For this purpose, this study (1) organised the most recent body of work on social media persuasion and the interrelated concepts of the credibility of social media, argumentation, trust, and social media authenticity, (2) developed, and formulated, hypotheses and a multi-group model, and (3) empirically assessed the model within two source conditions. A scenario-based online survey experiment was executed (N = 312), in which participants were randomly assigned to either an influencer post group or an employee-ambassador post group, and subsequently completed validated measures on a 7-point scale. Data were examined employing CFA, and SEM, with bootstrapped indirect effects and multi-group analysis. The results confirmed the proposed mediation model: the credibility of the message and the quality of the arguments positively influenced brand trust and attitude, and these organismic variables,

particularly brand trust, were the most powerful predictors of purchase intention. Perceived authenticity affected purchase intention, while in both groups, the quality of the arguments did not significantly predict authenticity. Source type mattered: employee-ambassador posts were perceived as more authentic, and the credibility-trust relation was significantly stronger in the employee-ambassador condition. The results suggest that brands should focus on building trust and authenticity that positively affect purchase intentions by using employee-ambassadors to convey credible and richly informative messages.

SAMTRAUKA

Magistro baigiamajame darbe nagrinėjama socialinės prekybos problema: kaip skirtingas komunikacijos šaltinis (nuomonės formuotojas ir darbuotojas ambasadorius) bei žinutės kokybė veikia vartotojų ketinimą pirkti produktus. Darbo tikslas – įvertinti, kaip žinutės patikimumas ir argumentų kokybė per prekės ženklo pasitikėjimą, požiūrį į žinutę ir suvokiamą autentiškumą lemia ketinimą pirkti, bei ar šie ryšiai skiriasi pagal šaltinio tipą. Siekiant tikslo buvo atlikta literatūros analizė, suformuluotos hipotezės ir sudarytas integruotas SCT–ELM–TPB–S-O-R modelis, o vėliau atliktas kiekybinis eksperimentinis tyrimas internetinės apklausos būdu. Tyrime dalyvavo 312 respondentų, kurie atsitiktinai buvo priskirti vienai iš dviejų sąlygų ir įvertino matytą socialinio tinklo įrašą 7 balų skalėmis. Duomenys analizuoti taikant patvirtinamąją faktorių analizę ir struktūrinių lygčių modeliavimą, o netiesioginiai efektai įvertinti bootstrap metodu ir palyginti tarp grupių. Gauti rezultatai parodė, kad žinutės patikimumas ir argumentų kokybė teigiamai siejasi su pasitikėjimu prekės ženklu ir požiūriu į žinutę, o ketinimą pirkti stipriausiai prognozavo pasitikėjimas prekės ženklu. Suvokiamas autentiškumas taip pat didino ketinimą pirkti, tačiau argumentų kokybė autentiškumo reikšmingai neprognozavo. Įtraukus tarpininkus, tiesioginiai patikimumo ir argumentų kokybės efektai ketinimui pirkti tapo nereikšmingi, todėl pabrėžiamas tarpininkavimo mechanizmas. Darbuotojo ambasadoriaus įrašai buvo vertinami kaip autentiškesni, o patikimumo ir pasitikėjimo ryšys šioje sąlygoje buvo stipresnis. Rekomenduojama stiprinti patikimumo signalus, teikti informatyvius argumentus ir strategiškai naudoti darbuotojus ambasadorius pasitikėjimui bei autentiškumui didinti. Tyrimo rezultatai kol kas nepublikuoti; numatoma adaptacija straipsniui.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS *(alphabetical order)*

AMOS — IBM SPSS Amos (Analysis of Moment Structures)
AQ — Argument Quality
AVE — Average Variance Extracted
BT — Brand Trust
CCA — Consumer Call to Action
CFA — Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI — Comparative Fit Index
CR — Composite Reliability
ELM — Elaboration Likelihood Model
MC — Message Credibility
MGA — Multi-Group Analysis
NFI — Normed Fit Index
PA — Perceived Authenticity
PI — Purchase Intention (Intention to Buy)
RMSEA — Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SD — Standard Deviation
SEM — Structural Equation Modeling
S–O–R / SOR — Stimulus–Organism–Response
SPSS — Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics)

SCT — Source Credibility Theory
SRMR — Standardized Root Mean Square Residual
TLI — Tucker–Lewis Index
TPB — Theory of Planned Behavior / Behaviour
α — Cronbach's alpha
β — Standardized regression coefficient (beta weight)

INTRODUCTION

Relevance and Background of the Topic

Purchasing patterns for consumers over the past 10 years have changed again as there is a greater influence of social media and online networks. Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, and Facebook have diversified from purely social networking and integrates into marketing and even Direct Selling. Revenues from social commerce have rapidly increased over the last 5 years and represent a greater percentage of global retail. An even more prominent shift comes as consumers of social media, more than ever, see social media as a legitimate platform for buying and selling products.

At the same time, there is a greater distrust of advertising. Nielsen (2023) reports state that there is a greater prevalence of classical advertising (commercials, print ads, online banners) being viewed as interruptive, impersonal, and or manipulative. It is more and more common for consumers to avoid overt corporate advertising and desire recommendations using vernacular that makes it appear that it comes from a peer. The complexity surrounding this shift for marketers is the need to trust and use authenticity in their messaging.

One significant developmental response has been the increase in use of influencer marketing. Companies now collaborate with people who have established a following and a personal brand online. Unlike nameless and faceless businesses, Social Media Influencers are viewed as people with whom consumers can relate, providing personal testimonies about products. Histories have shown that the influence of the perceived credibility of social media marketers, in terms of expertise, trust and in some cases physical attractiveness, has a positive influence on attitude toward advertising and the intentions to purchase. For example, Coutinho et al. (2023) demonstrated that, with respect to influencer credibility, perceived honesty was more positive in improving audience attitude toward the ads, which subsequently increased intention toward purchase. Likewise, Ashraf et al. (2023) demonstrated influence credibility as one of the significant factors in enhancing consumer trust and subsequently driving the purchase decision.

Another occurrence is the employment of ambassadors for brand advocacy.Organizations are now allowing and encouraging employees to advocate for the brand by promoting products on social media and sharing product stories, behind-the-scenes social media posts, and personal testimonials. Volunteers, being representatives from the inside of the brand, offer an authenticity and authority that marketers and outside spokespeople do not have. Miles et al. (2014) have argued that employees have an understanding of the product and their voice, being a genuine 'customer'

is often an unselling perspective. Supporting evidence along these lines comes from the recent work of Šontaitė et al. (2022), who illustrate that communication of company-ambassadors increases interest and trust of the company by potential customers, though also indicating that the trust was not a strong influence on the direct purchase of the product. Edelman (2021) also indicates that employees, 'people like me' are one of the most credible advocates of the company.

The current marketing landscape presents marketers with a critical decision regarding the ability of two distinct sources to persuade consumers to buy products. The first type of source, employee ambassador, represents an insider view of a company; hence, it is often perceived as authentic by consumers. Conversely, influence represents the opposite approach to marketing. Influencers are seen as having a universal appeal because of their large following and engaging delivery style. When considering these two types of sources, marketers must determine the relative degree of influence for each type. In addition, they must determine how to distribute their budget and communication plans to these two types of sources. Campaign effectiveness and the management of brand trust have direct implications for these two types of sources. As the market continues to evolve, marketers will continue to seek ways to find and identify the consumers they want to keep loyal to their brand.

Problem Background

Research on persuasion in the digital age has flourished, but prior research focused on the message source or message content, but not how the two interact. Classic source credibility theory (SCT) (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey, 1999) outlines three key attributes of a persuader; expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. These attributes result in the persuader's message being more effective. Even in digital contexts, these attributes are shown to be important. Recent studies show that perceived source credibility, especially trustworthiness, yields better outcomes (e.g., more favorable attitudes, greater access to quality, and higher purchase intent). For instance, Hossain et al. (2025) showed that a credible social media celebrity endorser increased advertisement trust, belief on quality, and thus purchase intent. A meta-analysis by Pornpitakpan (2004) supports that audience are more acceptive and less skeptical to information if they think the source is expert and honest.

Simultaneously, message content is a central concern of the theory of persuasion. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012) argues that motivated and able consumers are primarily influenced by the quality of arguments, that is, the strength and coherence

of a message. Petty and Wegener (2014) conceptualize argument quality as informativeness (accuracy, relevance, and sufficiency of information) and persuasiveness (logic or evidence that is convincing). Consumers' perceived usefulness of a message and positive attitudes toward the product offered are the result of high-quality information and sound arguments. For instance, in his study of viral marketing of mobile apps, Nashrulloh (2025) demonstrated that strong argument quality reduced skepticism, increased perceived content usefulness, and increased intention to purchase. It can be concluded from this evidence that content is of utmost importance; messages that are substantive and logically structured can engage consumers through the central route of processing and improve brand evaluations.

While various advances in research and theory have strengthened our understanding of source and message credibility, empirical evidence demonstrating the interactions between sources (e.g., source type and authority) and message quality on consumer behavior are lacking. For instance, research on electronic word-of-mouth often looks at source authority and message authority as independent elements (Cheung et al., 2009), without an understanding of the combined impact of these sources when communicating to a consumer. Additionally, there has been very limited research examining employee ambassadors as distinct sources of credibility. While influencer marketing represents a substantial area of research focus, employees as credible brand advocates have been relatively under-researched (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). It has only been the last few years that researchers have begun to explore the impact of employee-generated social media posts on external perceptions of consumers (E. Soens & A. S. Claeys, 2023). Therefore, although there are significant theoretical developments around both who conveys persuasive messages and how those messages are constructed, there is a challenge with integrating these two streams of literature to provide an integrated vision from which future research can be developed.

Research Gap

Building on the background above, three clear research gaps are identified:

1.   **Comparative gap:** In light of all this burgeoning research, nobody has yet directly compared the persuasive power of social media influencers vis-a-vis employee ambassadors. Few have actually tested – within the same framework - which type of source more strongly persuades consumers and leads them to change their attitudes and/or purchase prices. Since brands spend

money on both influencers and buy influence through their employee advocacy programs, it is unclear among which source the higher return lies.

2.   **Content–context gap:** Prior findings on message argument quality are context-specific – depending on product category examined, audience level of involvement, platform etc. – and therefore it is unclear when strong arguments work and when they do not, and how argument quality interacts with the different source types. Do strong arguments persuade either from the influencer or the employee? How does message content effectiveness change depending on the source or form of communication?

3.   **Theoretical integration gap:** Research on persuasion has no shortage of theories, but it often suffers from a practical limitation: each theory tends to be examined on its own. Studies may demonstrate that credible sources or strong arguments increase persuasion, but they seldom explain—within one coherent framework—how source cues and message cues jointly move consumers from perception to intention. This study therefore argues for an integrated conceptual model that places Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model at its core, while linking them to (a) intentional outcomes via the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), (b) psychological mediation via the Stimulus–Organism–Response model, and (c) authenticity and identity-based evaluations via Self-Congruity Theory (Sirgy, 1982). Such an integration helps specify a clearer chain of influence: credibility and message quality shape key intermediate judgments (e.g., brand trust, attitude toward the message, perceived authenticity), which subsequently drive intention to buy. Despite its usefulness, this kind of theory integration remains uncommon in the existing literature, where single-theory tests still dominate.

Thesis Aim and Objectives

This thesis tackles one of the many underexplored albeit simple questions pertaining to social media marketing today. When and to what extent does persuasion on social media (specifically Instagram) depend on who the speaker (source) is, and what is being said (message)? More specifically, the thesis looks at the relationships between the credibility and the quality of the arguments of the persuasive communication on the influencers versus the employee-ambassadors, and the consumers' brand trust, attitude, and message authenticity, and how these perceptions collectively drive the purchase intention. Design of the Research. In light of the above, the study will focus on four objectives:\ Integrating the literature: Consolidate and synthesize the contemporary literature on source credibility (influencer credibility and employee advocacy),

message quality, brand trust, attitude, and purchase intention. Refining the principal constructs and relationships: Through source and message attributes, define the major constructs and plausible relationships from the literature and the connections between the disparate fields to help explain how Consumers' Call to Action (CCA) is realized.

Integrating for building a conceptual model: Construct a unified integrated framework that combines Source Credibility Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model along with intentional outcomes (Theory of Planned Behavior), psychological processes (Stimulus–Organism–Response) as a mediation and identity-based evaluations like authenticity (Self-Congruity Theory). The model specifies a number of routes through which source and message components interact via discernment (e.g., authenticity, brand trust, attitudes) toward a bloc of purposes, and channel the outcome of purchase intention in the case of influencer and employee-both- ambassador communications. Operationalization of the integrated model toward an empirical agenda: Develop hypotheses and design a quantitative study that aims to inform and to determine the effectiveness of influencers versus employee-ambassadors on consumer psychology and behavioral intention. Both the integrated and empirical models seek to elucidate the convergence of the who and the what nexus of communication to propel persuasion in social media, with practical implications in marketing (e.g., when brands are likely to gain more from employee advocacy communication vs. influencer endorsement).

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND / LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Message Credibility and Its Influence on Perceived Brand Trust, Attitude Toward the Message, Perceived Authenticity, and Intention to Buy

1.1.1 Introduction to Message Credibility

In this thesis, the expression 'message credibility' concerns the evaluation of audience members in regard to the persuasive communication, and to what extent they think it may be worthy of believing. However, that evaluation is not likely to be based on the content, or the source, and that's what is critical. It comprises a holistic assessment of the speaker (the communicator) and the content (the message) simultaneously. Consumers' acceptance of a claim is likely to happen when and only when the communicator is, to use the commonly said terms, credible, and the message is also plausible, no fake or beliefs. The importance of credibility stands out in the context of digital and social media marketing, where audience members are bombarded with content. As a result, they become very sophisticated in identifying when they are trying to be persuaded, which is commonly and does not constitute an exception of digital marketing. In this context, a credible message does not 'merely' persuade. It 'earns the right to be credible. Source Credibility Theory is a favorite classic starting point for these streams of thoughts.

The effect of a communicator is a direct function of three features (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey, 1999), i.e., (1) expertise: (having enough perceived competence and knowledge), (2) trustworthiness (having perceived honesty and is unbiased), and (3) attractiveness (having perceived likability, relatability and is attention grabbing, and even includes physical appeal). Most of the persuasion context, estimations of the message and the brand behind the message is more favorable, when the communicator is evaluated high on the three dimensions. In social media, credibility is more distinct depending on the source type. Influencers often credibility is perceived because of relatable social reality and the sense of coming off as 'real users' as opposed to professional representatives. In contrast, employee ambassadors might also be perceived credible because of their insider knowledge and expertise, however they are also evaluated on brand affiliation, which can enhance perceived authenticity or raise suspicion depending on the message. In both instances, perceived credibility affects outcomes such as when the communicator is seen as expert and trustworthy, the audience is more likely to accept the message claims, enhance

favorable attitude of the message, and increase trust on the brand, ultimately increase purchase intention.

The empirical findings will be analyzed in the next few subsections. It will be centered on the functions of credibility in the interactions of ambassadors and influencers and employees.

1.1.2 Empirical Evidence from Influencer-Credibility Studies

Most recent research on influencer marketing shows that credibility is not just an added bonus. It is a pivotal factor that impacts how audience members understand the advertisement, how they assess the product, and whether they decide the brand is worthy of their trust. When an audience views an influencer as credible, they are more likely to be responsive to that communication and have an increased likelihood to buy the product. Persuasion is enhanced on so many levels when audience members have a more positive view of the advertisement. This leads to even greater likelihood of a purchase. An example is the study by Coutinho et al. (2023) that showed how positive influencer credibility improved advertisement attitude which led to greater intention to purchase. Most importantly, trustworthiness was the primary factor for positive advertisement attitude, surpassing attractiveness. This indicates that in social-media marketing, the audience is not influenced as much by the persuasive strategies and style of the advertisement as they are by knowing that the advertisement is coming from a trustworthy and credible source. A similar factor seems to be the case in more focused product areas as well. In the area of Beauty, Hossain et al. (2025) showed that, more so than lower source credibility, higher source credibility increased message trustworthiness which increased perceived product quality and intention to purchase the product.The findings suggest that credibility serves a multiplicative function. A trustworthy influencer adds not only likeability to an ad, but they also add a level of credibility to what the advertisers claim about the product, leading to inferences of higher quality being made. This subsequently supports the decision to purchase. Furthermore, this effect of perceived credibility facilitates communications of trust on an inter-relational level. Summary work by Rizma and Gunanto (2024) findings that trust in an influencer directly leads to increased trust in the brand and predicts purchase intention. This suggests that there is a flow of confidence from the influencer to the brand as a result of this trust relationship. Other, related evidence suggests that this is a result of parasocial interaction. Ashraf et al. (2023) documented that the influencer's credibility leads to trust on the part of the consumer, thus influencing buying behavior, an idea consistent with the expectation of stable, inter-personal relationships that the influencer's

recommendations should be accepted. This work complements Lou and Yuan (2019) work, which identified an explanatory pattern to this phenomenon, by showing that the perceived value of the content and expertise, alongside trustworthiness, greatly enhances the influencer's credibility, with subsequent positive influences on purchase intention.

The studies imply that influencer authenticity positively impacts persuasion through two related routes: (a) an evaluative route that enhances attitudes toward the advertisement and reinforces product beliefs (e.g., increased perceived quality) and (b) a trust route that cultivates confidence in the influencer and that trust is then passed on to the brand. From a practical standpoint, marketers should understand the benefits of credibility and how it is most advantageous when marketers\' audiences view it as earned, rather than as superficial, through cues of trust and genuine attention.

1.1.3 Employee Ambassadors and the Credibility–Authenticity Link

Employee Social media employee brand ambassadors differ from social media influencers. Influencers market products and brands at a distance, but employees are advocates from a distance. This difference, employee credibility and employee authenticity, allows audiences to receive messages in different ways. Employees understand both the products and the organization, allowing them to convey authenticity. This argument was made by Miles and Mangold (2014), stating that employees are credible due to their exposure to a company's products and brand values. It becomes clear why an engineer, or customer service representative, or any employee can become advocates and be knowledgeable about the product or service in their dealings. Employees intentionally and authentically convey, and audiences respond to that message, to generate brand trust. Strong brand trust and perceptions create positive outcomes for organizations. New data confirms this credibility and authenticity influence.

The findings outlined in Case Study Employees Advocacy Program (2022) delineate how employee-ambassadors' communication resulted in customers becoming more interested in and trusting of the company. It is interesting to note however that the immediate purchase intention was positively influenced to a lesser extent (Šontaitė et al., 2022). It is plausible to consider that employees' long-term relationships with customers may end up being more beneficial to the company as they focus on building the goodwill and credibility necessary for a positive brand association, even if the employees do not contribute to immediate sales. E. Soens and A.-S. Claeys (2023) Experimental Study contributed evidence in support of this suggestion. The study revealed

that employees of organizations that positively advertised the company had an improved attitude toward the organization and increased supportive behavioral intentions. Notably positive impact was observed regardless of whether or not employees were perceived to be genuinely passionate or incentivized to participate. In that instance, it appears that the audience provided a baseline level of credibility to employees undermined only in the presence of incentives. Employees ambassadors are not perceived to be persuasive because they are more glamorized, rather they are perceived to more eloquently express the message because they are more credible and the message is more authentic.

Because of their unique insight, employees speak with authority, and because of their organizational ties, brand statements can sound more like experienced, and less like, ordinary endorsements. Hence, communicating with employees can shape persuasion through trusting the brand more and seeing it as more authentic—not as an instantaneous call to action, but as a slower, incremental way.

1.1.4 Authenticity as a Mediator

Across both influencer- and employee-driven communications, perceived authenticity has increasingly been treated as the psychological "bridge" that links credibility to downstream consumer responses. In marketing, authenticity refers to the extent to which the communicator is seen as genuine, truthful, and consistent with who they really are—not merely playing a role for commercial gain. At the brand level, authenticity also concerns whether the brand is perceived as staying true to its values and identity (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Put simply, credibility answers "Can I believe this?" whereas authenticity pushes the audience toward "Do I feel this is real?"—and that shift often matters for trust, engagement, and ultimately buying decisions.

Authenticity strengthens persuasion because people are more willing to trust—and emotionally connect with—messages that feel unscripted and experience-based. Napoli et al. (2014), for example, developed a consumer-based brand authenticity scale and showed that higher perceived brand authenticity predicts stronger brand trust and more robust consumer–brand engagement. When a brand (or spokesperson) comes across as authentic, audiences tend to infer honesty and integrity, which makes trust easier to grant. In influencer marketing, the same logic applies, but with a distinctly "social" twist. Sokolova and Kefi (2019) found that parasocial interactions—one-sided, friendship-like bonds with influencers—can raise perceived influencer

authenticity, which in turn predicts higher purchase intention for endorsed products. In other words, followers are not only processing what influencers say; they are continuously checking whether the influencer still seems "true to themselves" and genuinely convinced by what they promote.

Recent work clarifies how authenticity functions as a mediator rather than merely a feel-good descriptor. Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that influencers maintain credibility partly by actively managing authenticity, for instance by being transparent about sponsorships and staying consistent with their persona over time. When influencers are open about their motivations—rather than hiding commercial intent behind performance—audiences tend to read their communication as more authentic, which then supports trust in endorsements. Empirically, Gohil et al. (2025) similarly reported that perceived influencer authenticity strongly predicts both brand trust and purchase intention among Gen Z consumers, with trust partially mediating the effect. This pattern suggests a dual role: authenticity can influence persuasion directly, while also working indirectly by building trust—an ingredient that reliably moves consumers closer to buying.

Overall, authenticity is best understood as a key psychological pathway in persuasive communication. A credible source performs better partly because that credibility is experienced as authentic. In both influencer and employee-ambassador contexts, authenticity helps transform credibility from a largely cognitive judgment ("this person seems competent and honest") into something more affective and motivating ("this feels genuine"). For practitioners, the implication is not "be authentic" as a slogan, but to create conditions that allow authenticity to be perceived: encouraging influencers to use consistent self-presentation and transparent disclosure and enabling employees to speak in their own voice rather than in polished corporate scripts. When authenticity is convincingly signaled, it becomes a powerful driver of consumer trust, engagement, and ultimately purchase behavior.

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1.1.5 Comparative Insights: Influencers vs Employee-Ambassadors

The literature reviewed above suggests that influencers and employee brand ambassadors can both function as credible communicators on social media—but they do not persuade in quite the same way. Put simply, influencers often win attention through relatability, whereas employees tend to win confidence through insider knowledge. To make these differences easier to see at a glance, Table 1 contrasts the two source types across their typical credibility cues, content style, perceived motivation, and likely persuasive pathways:

Table 1

Comparison of influencers and employee-ambassadors as persuasive sources.

Feature	Influencers (external spokespeople)	Employee-Ambassadors (internal spokespeople)
Main credibility cues	Relatable **trustworthiness** and likability (peer-like appeal). Often perceived as everyday consumers who happen to have expertise in lifestyle or trends.	**Expertise** about the product and **insider authenticity**. Seen as company insiders sharing genuine, experience-based knowledge.
Typical content style	**Lifestyle-oriented** content, aspirational imagery, personal stories that integrate the product into everyday life. The tone is conversational and entertaining.	**Informational, behind-the-scenes** content, and brand storytelling. Emphasis on product details, company values, and real use cases (often more educational in tone).
Perceived motivation	Primarily **commercial** (sponsored partnerships or paid promotions). Audience knows influencers receive incentives, which can raise skepticism if not mitigated by authenticity.	Often seen as **intrinsically motivated** (identification with the brand). Even when part of a program, employees' advocacy is viewed as less overtly commercial, since it aligns with their role and pride in the company.
Key persuasive pathway	**Credibility → Attitude → Intention**. A credible influencer improves attitude toward the ad/brand, which drives purchase intention. Emotional connection (via parasocial relationships) can also directly affect intention.	**Credibility → Authenticity → Trust → Intention**. An employee's credibility boosts perceived authenticity and brand trust, which then lead to higher purchase intent. The message is persuasive largely through enhancing brand credibility and transparency.

Source: Compiled by the author.

As Table 1 illustrates, influencers are often persuasive because they feel like "someone like me": their credibility is frequently tied to perceived trustworthiness and likability, and their content tends to be lifestyle-oriented, conversational, and designed to blend into everyday scrolling. Employee ambassadors, in contrast, typically draw on a different advantage: they are "in the know." Their posts are more likely to come across as informational, behind-the-scenes, or experience-based, with credibility grounded in expertise and an insider form of authenticity. In that sense, if influencers are the friend in your feed who says "you should try this," employee ambassadors are the person who can also explain *why it works*—and what the brand actually stands for.

These differences are consistent with prior analyses. Miles and Mangold (2014) note that an employee's insider status can make employee advocacy as persuasive as—or in some cases even more persuasive than—outsider endorsement, precisely because audiences may infer stronger authenticity and commitment from employees. Practically, this implies that the two source types may excel at different parts of the persuasion chain. Influencers may be particularly effective when the goal is to quickly build brand likability, visibility, or trendiness through broad peer-like appeal. Employee ambassadors may be especially useful when the goal is to cultivate deeper trust in product quality or brand integrity by reinforcing authenticity and credibility over time.

In many campaigns, the most sensible approach is not choosing one and rejecting the other, but combining them strategically: influencers can help create initial attention and favorable attitudes, while employee voices can later reinforce authenticity, transparency, and trust. The broader takeaway is that credibility is not one single "thing"—it is earned through different cues depending on who is speaking. Brands therefore benefit from matching the source type to the persuasive route they want to activate, rather than assuming that all credible communication works in the same way.

1.1.6 Section Conclusion

The reviewed literature leads us to believe that credibility is what leads to positive outcomes with influence. Whether messages come from an influencer or an employee ambassador, perceived credibility of an employee influencer will mostly likely hold positive outcomes such as positive feedback, increased brand trust, and even higher purchase intentions. However, employees and influencers attain credibility in different ways. Employees ultimately receive credibility from relationship peeriness, as endorsements from employees feel like i know this people and i am their friend. Employees on the other hand, receive credibility from competence as an insider and have seen the inner workings and thus can be trusted form of authenticity, because their brand people genuinely back the product. And this leads to the most important point: if the audience is not convinced of the message, the effort has been useless. A message that is perceived as staged or untrustworthy cannot be improved with better visuals, higher post frequency, and more precise targeting. Credibility is not simply an advantage, it's essential, and visibly so. With that being said, credibility is not a stand alone advantage.

Studies indicate that this functions attitudinally, through brand trust, and through psychological familiarity with brand perceived authenticity. A trusted influencer may change

purchase intents by attitude improvements by changing the perceptions of the advertisements, whereas a trusted employee may do so by improving the perceptions, and trust, of the brand as an authentic employee. Both credibility and trust can determine actions directly by guiding purchase decisions and indirectly by changing the action guiding beliefs, evaluations, and perceptions. This is straightforward with respect to brand syndication: who you allow to speak on your behalf and how they speak is as important as the message itself. The following sections address this by the narrowing to message factors, specifically to the quality of the argument, then to the integration of source and message cues, and how these impact consumer response. The practical implication is that in an attention saturated, skepticism rich, environment, trustable brand voices, whether advocates, internal employees, or influencers, are essential.

1.2 Argument Quality and Its Influence on Perceived Brand Trust, Attitude Toward the Message, Perceived Authenticity, and Intention to Buy

1.2.1 Conceptualizing Argument Quality in the Context of Online Consumer Reviews

The term 'argument quality' in persuassion research refers to the strength of the argument and the validity of the support and reasoning given (Petty & Wegener, 2014). In the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the outcome is said to be particularly crucial when the people in question are focused and motivated to think at length about the argument. In the case of central-route processing, the presence of strong argument tends to cause the audience to be motivated and have strong, resilient attitudes and high levels of cognitive functioning. The presence of weak arguments, however, could cause dire effects and damage the audience to the point of being frustrated or annoyed. Digital contexts like online reviews, influencer posts, and employee-generated content, argument quality is less encountered as formal logic and more as simple days to day textual features that make a particular message appear to have credibility and be useful. Overall, people tend to describe good arguments as being composed of a high number of specific details, maintaining a high level of internal logic besides containing examples to support the claims, and addressing the relevant problem in a just and contextual pros and cons level (Cheung et al., 2009; J. Liu et al., 2021). It is, therefore, fair to conclude that the quality of the argument is determined not on the level of 'polished' fancy wording, but rather on the solid evidence and reasoning that the message provides to the audience.

The Information Adoption Model focuses on the quality of arguments presented as the primary factor that determines whether the information will be perceived as useful. This, in turn,

will lead to whether the message will be utilized to make judgments and take actions (Cheung et al., 2009; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). High quality arguments also serve as central-route cues in social commerce and social media environments. They shape meaningful and significant trust and attitude formation toward brands as well as consequential intention to purchase (Qiu & Zhang, 2024).

1.2.2 Empirical Evidence on Argument Quality and Its Consequences

Empirical Research conducted on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messages has consistently proven that the quality of argument presented will be the determining factor as to whether people will use the information presented and what actions will be taken afterward. In the context of online reviews, Cheung et al. (2008) identified the components of comprehensiveness and relevance to be the primary driving factors in the adoption of reviews. This has also been taken further by Liu et al.

Q. Liu et al. (2021) illustrate the quality of an argument along two related dimensions, namely, informativeness (e.g., elaborated attributes, deployment contingencies) and persuasiveness (e.g., sound reasons and rationalizations). These dimensions predict the likelihood of a review being perceived as useful and the resultant buying behavior, implying that consumers do pay attention to the case being made, and the case is made well. Liu et al. (2021) findings are further corroborated by large scale evidence. For example, Qiu and Zhang (2024) meta-analysis covering 156 studies demonstrates that content related indices of review, namely, diagnosticity and information quality, along with review polarity and ratings, exert considerable impact on intention to purchase, . Also, Alzate et al. (2021) show that reviews that are, perceived and labelled, helpful, i.e., visible, lengthy, detailed, and textually elaborate, can drive sales of the associated product significantly. Therefore, quality of argument is not a mere stylistic inclination, but an important predictor of market related consequences. This trend is not restricted to text reviews only. In the perceived argument quality is positively related to credibility, and ultimately, purchase intention, in the sponsored posts. Breves et al. (2024) also mentions the case of YouTube gadget review videos, where credibility is paramount. Wijaya (2024) shows that in such videos, perceived argument quality is positively related to higher perceived credibility and, through credibility, increases purchase intention.

Breves et al. (2024) demonstrates that greater levels of cognitive thinking due to arguments sustains stimulated arguments and enhances the evaluations of the both the content on the

sponsored content and the brands being promoted. In these digital formats, the meaning of the implication is the same. Quality of arguments does actual psychological work-there is real psychological work shaping perceived arguments, real trust value, and the other psychological work value that supports the decisions to purchase. In the context of this thesis, these findings justify treating argument quality as a central message factor that can operate alongside (and potentially interact with) source cues to shape consumer responses across influencer and employee-ambassador communications.

1.2.3 Argument Quality and Perceived Brand Trust

Brand trust can be understood as a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand to do what it promises—both in terms of ability and good intent (Dam, 2020). Online, that willingness is harder to earn because consumers typically cannot verify quality before purchase and must make decisions under uncertainty. Under these conditions, the message itself becomes a proxy for the brand: content that looks careful, transparent, and product-specific can signal competence and honesty, while vague or overly polished claims can trigger suspicion.

This is where argument quality matters. Detailed explanations, clear reasoning, and concrete evidence (e.g., specific ingredients, usage conditions, comparisons, or measurable benefits) do not just "sound persuasive"—they reduce ambiguity. They give consumers something they can evaluate, which supports the inference that the brand (or the brand's representative) knows what they are talking about and is willing to be accountable.

Evidence from e-commerce and social-commerce research supports this logic. Work grounded in the Information Adoption Model shows that when consumers perceive reviews as high in argument quality, they see them as more useful and are more willing to rely on the associated seller, vendor, or platform (Cheung et al., 2008; Qiu & Zhang, 2024). Alzate et al. (2021) similarly suggest that the reviews people label as most "helpful"—often richer, more detailed, and more diagnostic—can play a disproportionate role in shaping product-level reputation, including whether the brand is seen as trustworthy.

Although many studies focus on trust in information sources or vendors, the underlying inference process maps neatly onto brand trust: well-argued, transparent content encourages consumers to see the brand as knowledgeable, consistent, and honest, thereby reinforcing trust (Dam, 2020). In the present thesis, argument quality in influencer and employee-ambassador

messages is therefore treated as an important informational basis from which consumers infer whether the focal cosmetics brand is trustworthy.

1.2.4 Argument Quality, Brand Trust, and Attitude toward the Message

Attitude toward the message refers to a consumer's overall evaluation of a specific communication—such as an Instagram post, a review, or a short product recommendation. Under the Elaboration Likelihood Model, strong arguments tend to produce more favorable message evaluations when people are sufficiently involved and able to think through what they are reading or watching, because strong arguments generate predominantly positive cognitive responses (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Carpenter, 2015). Weak arguments, by contrast, can invite counter-arguing—sometimes leaving the audience less persuaded than before.

Digital evidence is broadly consistent with this. In online review contexts, Cheung et al. (2008) show that higher argument quality increases perceived usefulness, which then supports more favorable attitudes toward the review and greater likelihood of adopting its recommendations. In influencer advertising, Breves et al. (2024) similarly find that when followers perceive sponsored posts as containing strong and well-developed arguments, they engage in deeper elaboration and evaluate the content more positively. More generally, messages that are concrete, logically structured, and clearly linked to consumer-relevant benefits tend to be received more favorably than content that relies on vague claims or purely emotional appeal (Qiu & Zhang, 2024).

In this study, argument quality is therefore conceptualized as a central-route message feature that shapes consumers' attitudes toward both influencer and employee-ambassador posts. These attitudes are then expected to carry part of argument quality's influence forward—contributing to downstream perceptions (including perceived authenticity) and, ultimately, intention to buy.

1.2.5 Argument Quality and Perceived Authenticity

Morhart et al (2015) and Napoli et al (2014) define perceived authenticity as the amount to which clients and customers interact with a particular brand as being genuine, as well as sincere and in a particular frame of mind (true to itself). Although authentication is mostly focused on aspects of identity and values, it could also be as a result of something more direct in terms of being a little practical in nature and that is how the message is argued. A message which a communicator customizes and offers in terms of real-life experiences, trade-offs and tackles limitations in frank ways, generally tend to come out as someone is actually being honest and is

not just out to perform a script. As a result, well argued messages tend to be more honest and empirical sounding in the sense that "I'm telling you what I actually know", not "I'm just repeating a script." Alzate et al. (2021) offers evidence which is based on diagnostic and experience reviews that tend to attract judgment as being authentic, while reviews that come in a form of generic and uniformly positive remarks that tend to elicit inauthenticity. Unalmis (2024) suggests that in influencer marketing, there is a strong relationship between influencer perceived authenticity and details in informative beauty content. Breves et al.

The four statements when combined identify an information gap related to social media influencer messages along with employee-ambassador marketing. The gap is based on how the social media audience perceive the messages. Are those messages perceived as endorsements sponsored by an organization or genuine messages motivated by care about the organization or product. The four statements suggest the social media audience perceives influence sponsored messages as endorsements while employee-ambassador messages are seen as genuine. The messages are perceived to come from "lived experience' rather than corporate messaging. Perceptions with social media as described may change based on the quality of the arguments presented. High quality arguments presented by influencers initially sponsored messages may shift audience perceptions to recognize the influencers care about the sponsored product. Relevance of work experience and influence/care may shift audience perceptions from corporate sponsorship to genuine interest and endorsement Motivated by caring about the product.

1.2.6 Comparative Perspective: Argument Quality in Influencer vs. Employee-Ambassador Messages

The uneven nature of the argument quality across digital formats is a topic of concern. However, the concerns are also varying in the way they are coming from social media influencers vs corporate employees. There can be quality arguments from both camps, but they are coming from very different places, each with their own 'default styles'. These styles are not merely superficial, as they influence which of the psychological pathways are activated (e.g. trust, attitude, authenticity) such that the target is even moved to purchase. For the influencers, in depth argument quality manifests as experiential storytelling - here's what I tried, here's what happened, here's what might work for you'. Useful posts generally provide specific details of use (time, context, results) as well as comparisons (other options) and even coverage of advantages vs disadvantages.

According to studies, followers appreciate influencer content the most when it balances being informative and actionable, providing the audience with relevant reasons, tips, and explanations tailored to their lifestyle (Belanche et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019). When the reasoning is devoid of ambiguities and is presented with stepwise logical coherence supported by relevant demonstrable evidence (e.g., showing outcomes in before–after format), followers perceive the content to be of higher quality, which increases their trust in the influencer and the content and, subsequently, their intention to buy (Belanche et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Nonetheless, influencer communication occurs in a commercial ecosystem in which sponsorship is ubiquitous. This means that the quality of the reasoning has a double function. It serves to persuade, but it also helps the influencer appear authentic, which is essential in the face of skepticism.

As noted by Audrezet et al., 2020 and Belanche et al., 2021, people feel some posts on social media commercials lack authenticity if they contain only generalized compliments, emotional appeals, and weak reasoning. Some influencers try to mitigate this unprofessionalism by including counter-arguments to make their posts feel less like an advertisement and more like a personalized suggestion. On the other hand, posts made by employee-ambassadors show more insider transparency than an average post by other ambassadors. Employees who act as ambassadors have more knowledge than external endorsers about the product or service as they have an insider perspective and can discuss aspects such as service policies, quality control, and production standards.

Work that theorizes insider branding explains that employees should be seen as advocates for the brand (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). From a practical standpoint, employees' positive user-generated content encourages favorable attitudes and positive behaviors for the organization, regardless of whether content is user-generated as part of a management initiative (Soens & Claeys, 2023). From a persuasion perspective, insider-oriented arguments can reduce uncertainty and perceived risk by showing both competence ("we know what we are doing") and benevolence ("we are showing transparency"). So, strong arguments in user-generated content should improve brand trust and perceptions of brand authenticity (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020; Soens & Claeys, 2023). Still, there is one downside. If employee posts are perceived as more controlled, defensive, or dry and scripted (e.g., management), the result can feel very corporate (rather than

personal), which can further reduce authenticity, regardless of the details presented (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Khan et al., 2023).

These contrasts can be summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Typical argument-quality patterns in influencer vs. employee-ambassador messages.

Dimension	Influencer messages	Employee-ambassador messages
Typical form of arguments	Personal experience stories, product trials, lifestyle integration, comparative opinions.	Technical explanations, feature breakdowns, process/quality descriptions, FAQs.
Main focus of reasoning	User benefits, fit with follower lifestyle, emotional and social outcomes.	Product reliability, safety, performance, alignment with company values/standards.
Key central-route cues	Specific usage details, concrete examples, explicit pros/cons, comparisons to rivals.	Detailed specifications, process transparency, evidence of quality control and service.
Perceived strengths	Makes the product relatable and personally relevant; enhances attitude toward the post.	Reduces uncertainty and perceived risk; strongly supports brand trust and competence.
Potential weaknesses	May appear superficial or overly sponsored if arguments are vague or repetitive.	May feel corporate or scripted if tone is impersonal, which can weaken authenticity.

Source: Compiled by the author.

Theoretically speaking, quality and source of arguments vary because they activate distinct neural pathways. With respect to influencers, it seems that good arguments only increase positive attitudes toward the message, and they also perceived the influencer as more authentic, which had an impact on purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In the case of employee ambassadors, strong arguments seem to increase the perceptions of brand trust and brand authenticity more, which they had because of their insider position and their capacity to reveal more about the brand's structures and technological processes (S. Miles & W. Mangold, 2014; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020; E. Soens & A.-S. Claeys, 2023). Hence, this thesis assumes that the quality of arguments constitutes a principal predictor of consumer responses, as well as a characteristic of a misplaced message, for which the effects might vary depending on the source

aligned to influencer and employee ambassador. This ties directly to the greater aim of distinguishing the effects of mere communication versus the quality of arguments within a message.

1.2.7 Argument Quality and Intention to Buy

Intention to buy is a consumer's expectation on the likelihood of buying a product, which is generally how it is captured. Cheung & Sussman (2004) established beyond doubt evidence that stronger arguments leads to greater propensity of purchase. This happens either directly or indirectly through intermediate variables like perceived trustworthiness of the message, usefulness of the message (beliefs). Strong arguments influence attitudes towards the message and the brand (improving purchase attitudes towards the brand). There is empirical evidence for this posited mechanism in the digital context. Content quality is associated with positive purchase outcomes. Sussman & Siegal (2003) included quality of content in reviews, purchase intention, and other variables for measuring outcomes in e-commerce reviews, and in several reviews. These reviews corroborated content level of reviews predicting purchase intention. Alzate et al. (2021) and other reviews including the content quality of reviews that was visible, and rich in text, impacting sales rank significantly. And those reviews that included content of quality. This is true for other platforms. Wijaya et al. (2024) and Breves et al. (2020) also proved the same for other platforms with sponsored review content in social media, guided by the reviewers' review credibility.

Evidence from 2024 shows persuasive arguments make followers more willing to comply with a request. Overall, the research validates the consideration of the quality of arguments as a significant catalyst of purchase-related thought process and intention figures in the digital ecosystem—acting in parallel with, and at times, through, factors connected to the source such as trustworthiness and one-sided friendships.

1.2.8 Section Conclusion

In online influence, weak arguments are detrimental. Prior studies have placed the argument quality as a fundamental message feature that shapes online reviews, influencer reviews, and employee reviews. Consumers are more likely to adopt the information, trust the communicator and the brand, have a positive evaluation of the message, and see the recommendation as more genuine when arguments are specific, relevant, and justified rather than vague, generic, or emotional. These shifts lead to higher purchase intention (Cheung et al. 2008, Liu et al. 2021, Qiu & Zhang 2024, Alzate et al 2021, Breves et al. 2024). The present study has a rather straightforward implication. In influencer and employee-ambassador conditions, argument

quality should not only be seen as a possible direct predictor of purchase intention, but also as a significant upstream contributor to perceived brand trust, message attitude, and perceived authenticity. The study, by comparing these mechanisms across source types, can move past a simple "which works better" question to a more precise "why does it work" question, isolating the attributed mechanisms to the message quality from the attributed mechanisms to the source of message delivery.

1.3 Perceived Brand Trust, Attitude Toward the Message, and Perceived Authenticity as Drivers of Intention to Buy

1.3.1 Introduction: The Mediating Role of Internal Consumer States

The last sections were focused on the external characteristics of persuasive communication message-source credibility and quality of arguments. However, in consumer-behavior theory, there's an old principle that states: external cues do not drive behavior by themselves. They are important, because they change the interior of the consumer - how the message is interpreted, how the brand is evaluated, and how the communicator is emotionally 'received.' In the form of the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, persuasive messages are the Stimulus that shapes the inner evaluations and emotions of the organism, that then directs the behavioral intentions (Response) (Ajzen, 1991; Hossain et al, 2025). In social-media marketing, there are three inner states that stand out to be particularly central in the chain: perceived brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity.

Consumers' expectations from a brand and how reliable they perceive it to be is termed brand trust (Dam, 2020). Whether a consumer responds favorably or unfavorably to a particular marketing communication (e.g. Instagram advertisement, online review) is termed attitude toward the message (Ajzen, 1991; Coutinho et al., 2023). Perceived authenticity concerns the extent to which a brand or communicator is considered real and true to self, exhibiting transparency (Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015).

Recent empirical findings indicate that these variables act as mechanisms that transmit the effects that message attributes have on purchase intention. In other words, purchase intention is primarily a consequence of trust that is engendered by message credibility and high quality arguments, as well as positive attitudes and authenticity, as it legitimizes the intention to purchase (Dam, 2020; Nashrulloh, 2025; Gohil et al., 2025). Thus, each of these potentially mediating mechanisms is considered in the following subsections.

1.3.2 Perceived Brand Trust

Brand trust have been thought to be a main variable of the selection a consumer makes, and this idea has been further entrenched in the psychology of buying in the market. This is because the market offers what is generally easy to claim, but is very difficult to provide. The idea of brand trust is described as a consumer willingness in the reliance of a brand, as well as the action and capability of the brand to fulfill all the obligations it promises (Dam, 2020). Practically speaking, trust eliminates the consumer's fears, and the longer the consumer is with the brand, the more relationships the consumer will have. survey research has supported this role. As it was shown in the Vietnamese smartphone market survey conducted by Dam (2020) brand trust positively predicted brand preference and purchase intention. This was seen more strongly in the consumers of the high involvement segments. This trend seems reasonable. This is because in a certain domain, the lack of purchase for a proffered good, trust is not an unconscious emotional response, it is a very important emotional stand to decide the purchase. The lack of trust in a domain will make more people stay uninvolved. In social-media context situations, trust more often than not serves as a link. This was shown in the Rizma and Gunanto (2024) study, where it was shown that the trust attributed to an influencer by the consumer from Generation Z positively affected their purchase intention by increasing brand trust. In this case, trust is allowed to 'travel' from the influencer to the advertised brand.

Additional studies reflect this reasoning. Consumer behavior scholars examined the link between trust in an influencer and buying behavior. Ashraf et al. (2023) examined the role of trust in explaining the buying behavior of an influencer. They showed that trust in an influencer and the buying behavior of an influencer. Gohil et al. (2023) research, perceived influencer authenticity contributes to the trust of a brand and is validated through the higher purchase intentions of the brand within Gen Z. This is explained through the trust gained by the authenticity of the influencer. All these studies validate the close connection between message, source characteristics, perceived brand trust, and the purchase intention. In the current study, a message believed to have come from a credible influencer or employee ambassador is likely to enhance trust in the targeted brand of cosmetics and therefore the purchase intention.

1.3.3 Attitude Toward the Message

In TPB, an attitude serves as a salient forerunner of intention; the more positively individuals feel about a behavior or an object, the more they are inclined to act upon it (Ajzen,

1991).131 For instance, in digital advertising, this principle applies to attitude toward the message (or attitude toward the ad), which involves an immediate, gut, and affective evaluation toward a specific post as being likeable, enjoyable, or one that is in the realm of "worth my time." A plethora of studies indicate that this attitude about the message is not an outcome only; it often serves as a conduit through which credibility and quality of the arguments are channeled to purchase intention. Coutinho et al. (2023) for instance, demonstrated that influencer credibility positively enhanced attitude toward the advertisement, which, in turn, predicted intention to purchase. In their framework, attitude toward the advertisement completely mediated the effect of credibility on intention, which means that the audience is still expected to like and approve the message even if it comes from a highly credible source. A similar trend is observable when the emphasis is shifted from source cues to content cues. In the area of studying viral marketing for mobile applications, Nashrulloh (2025) noted that the perceived quality of arguments resulted in higher perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, which, in turn, improved the attitude toward the viral message.

The influence of message attitude, therefore, appears to have significantly positive influence on purchase intention ($\beta \approx 0.68$) further illustrating the potential of message attitude as a psychological connector of message variables to behavior outcomes. In the influencer context, the positive attitude toward the branded messages is the result of the high argument quality and message value (i.e., having informative, helpful and entertaining content). This, subsequently, increases purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Breves et al., 2024). Employee-generated content has been reported to have similar positive impact as relating to improving consumer attitude toward the organization and increasing behavioral intentions of supporting (or buying from) the organization positive work posts (Soens & Claeys, 2023). Therefore, within this thesis, attitude toward the message is taken to mean immediate evaluative response to message, having translated credibility plus quality of arguments to intention to purchase and this is irrespective of the source being an influencer or employee ambassador.

1.3.4 Perceived Authenticity

In skepticism marketing, perceived authenticity plays an important role because skepticism is marketing's default position. While audiences scroll, consumers think, "Is this true? Is this real?" Audiences see advertisements as potentially deceptive, which implies a lack of authenticity. In marketing, authenticity is defined by a brand's commitment to their values over time, authenticity,

and valuing integrity and quality in their work (Napoli et al. 2014; Morhart et al. 2015). Broadcasting authenticity, whether by an employee or influencer, is defined by being genuine and transparent in identity and values (Audrezet et al. 2020). According to Napoli et al. (2014), perceived authenticity is brand trust, engagement and is a consequence as to why authenticity is not just a mere decorative label. Morhart et al. (2015) concluded that genuine marketing is collateral. Genuine marketing reinforces psychological identification and loyalty. This is another way of saying that inauthentic marketing campaigns lose collateral and authenticity matters as a consequence. The influence of an endorsement is measured with perceived authenticity through a lack of social integration and fit.

According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), the higher the level of parasocial interaction, the higher the level of perceived influencer authenticity, and consequently, the higher the level of purchase intention toward the endorsed item. In this regard, it can be said that consumers are more inclined to purchase the endorsed item when the influencer is perceived to genuinely appreciate and use the item, as opposed to just reading a paid advertisement. \n\nAuthenticity is also frequently positioned as a link between the credibility of influencers and the positive outcomes of their endorsements. According to Audrezet et al. (2020), influencers continue to remain credible by practicing authenticity through transparency about their sponsorship, avoiding influencer partnerships that do not align with their brand persona, and only endorsing products that they actually use. When audience members consider these activities to be authentic, they are more likely to trust the influencer's endorsement. Supporting this line of reasoning, Gohil et al. (2025) demonstrate that perceived influencer authenticity and, as a result, increased brand trust and intention to purchase is especially true among Gen Z consumers, with trust serving as a partial mediation of the effect. \n\nIn the case of employee ambassadors, authenticity is a function of a different element, which is insider status. According to Miles and Mangold (2014), employee communication can be perceived as less commercially biased and more authentic than outsider endorsements, as employees are presumed to have firsthand experience with the brand and its products. This possibility is also supported by experimental evidence.

Soens and Claeys (2023) demonstrated that consumer attitudes and consumer behavior are positively influenced by work-related social-media posts written by employees. This finding supports the hypothesis that perceived authenticity may be enhanced by "real employees." Overall, authenticity can be perceived as one of the influencing psychological mechanisms that connects

both the influencer and the employee communication to purchase intention. Messages are perceived as being authentic to great extent, through value congruence, transparent sponsorship practices, or insider testimony, consumers are likely to trust the brand more and subsequently purchase it.

1.3.5 Synthesis of Mediating Mechanisms

Taken together, the literature points to a simple multi-step logic: external message and source cues rarely push people to buy directly. They work by shifting what happens *inside* the consumer—especially brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity—and these internal shifts are what carry the effect forward to intention to buy.

Step one: the stimuli.Message credibility and argument quality are the two main external triggers in this thesis. When the communicator seems trustworthy and competent, and when the content is specific, coherent, and relevant, consumers face less uncertainty and gain more diagnostic information. The message starts to look less like noise and more like usable input—signals that the brand is reliable and knows what it is doing (Cheung et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2021; Qiu & Zhang, 2024).

Step two: the organismic states. These stimuli then shape the three focal internal evaluations. Credibility and strong arguments nurture brand trust, reassuring consumers that the brand can and will deliver on its promises (Dam, 2020; Ashraf et al., 2023; Rizma & Gunanto, 2024). They also improve attitude toward the message, because the content feels informative, enjoyable, or simply well-made (Coutinho et al., 2023; Nashrulloh, 2025; Breves et al., 2024). And they strengthen perceived authenticity, signalling that the communicator—and, by extension, the brand—comes across as genuine and transparent rather than staged (Napoli et al., 2014; Audrezet et al., 2020; Gohil et al., 2025; Soens & Claeys, 2023).

Step three: the response. Once trust, positive message attitudes, and authenticity are in place, intention to buy becomes much easier to explain. Meta-analytic and empirical evidence consistently shows that these three states predict purchase intentions across contexts (Dam, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Qiu & Zhang, 2024). Importantly, they do not compete for space; they often move together. A strong post can simultaneously make the brand feel safer (trust), make the content feel appealing (attitude), and make the endorsement feel real (authenticity)—and each pathway can contribute to purchase intention in parallel.

One more point matters for this thesis: the same cue can travel through different routes depending on who speaks. In influencer communication, the persuasive lift may lean more heavily on attitude toward the message and influencer authenticity. In employee-ambassador communication, the lift may lean more strongly on brand trust and brand authenticity, given insider knowledge and perceived expertise (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Soens & Claeys, 2023). Still, the overall mechanism is integrated: across both source types, credibility and argument quality are expected to shape intention to buy cosmetics products largely by reshaping trust, attitudes, and authenticity inside the consumer.

1.3.6 Section Conclusion

Overall, the evidence suggests that brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity are not side effects of persuasive communication—they are the internal engines that convert source and message cues into intention to buy. Message credibility and argument quality matter, but rarely in a straight line: on their own, they do not guarantee behavioral change. They first need to become something the consumer can *feel and use*—trust in the brand, a favorable evaluation of the specific post, and the sense that the brand and its messengers are genuine and transparent (Dam, 2020; Coutinho et al., 2023; Napoli et al., 2014; Gohil et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this thesis models these three constructs as core mediators linking influencer versus employee-ambassador communications to purchase intention. By testing how brand trust, message attitudes, and authenticity perceptions respond to different combinations of message credibility and argument quality across the two source types, the empirical study aims to map the psychological routes through which social-media persuasion operates. The next section translates this logic into an integrated conceptual model and a set of testable hypotheses, specifying which paths should hold across source types and where source-type differences are most likely to emerge.

1.4 Integrated Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Introduction

A robust theoretical foundation is needed to explain not only whether influencer and employee-ambassador communications shape purchase intention, but how and through which psychological routes they do so. The preceding sections reviewed relevant theories in parallel; yet persuasion in digital commerce rarely follows a single, tidy script. Any adequate framework must keep three pieces in view at the same time: who is speaking (source cues such as credibility and insider authenticity), how the message is built (content strength such as argument quality), and

what changes inside the consumer (brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity) before intention to buy can emerge.

To capture this full chain, the present thesis brings together five complementary perspectives: Source Credibility Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework, and Self-Congruity Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ajzen, 1991; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Sirgy, 1982; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Rather than treating these theories as competing explanations, the thesis uses them as linked components of a single mechanism: external cues from the source and the message shape internal evaluations and identity-based perceptions, which then guide purchase intention in social-media settings.

1.4.2 Source Credibility Theory (SCT)

Source Credibility Theory starts from a simple claim: who delivers a message shapes how persuasive it can be. More specifically, SCT argues that persuasion depends largely on how the source is perceived on three dimensions—expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Expertise reflects perceived knowledge and competence; trustworthiness reflects honesty and integrity; and attractiveness captures likability, similarity, and sometimes physical appeal. Importantly, attractiveness often works as a "quick" peripheral cue—especially when audiences are not highly motivated or able to scrutinize the message in depth.

In social-media advertising, these classic dimensions remain highly relevant, but they tend to show up in platform-shaped ways. Recent findings suggest that higher perceived influencer credibility—particularly trustworthiness—predicts more favorable attitudes toward ads and stronger purchase intentions (Coutinho et al., 2023; Hossain et al., 2025). Coutinho et al. (2023), for instance, report that influencer trustworthiness is the strongest predictor of attitude toward social-media ads, which subsequently drives purchase intention. In a related context, Hossain et al. (2025) find that credible celebrity endorsers increase perceived message trustworthiness and perceived product quality, which then enhances intention to buy beauty-care products. Together, these studies reinforce a practical point: in crowded feeds where skepticism is common, trustworthiness often does more persuasive work than surface appeal.

Employee ambassadors, however, may arrive with a different credibility "signature." Rather than credibility built primarily on peer-like relatability, employees can be perceived as

insiders—people with firsthand exposure to the product, the brand's routines, and the company's values. This insider position can translate into a distinctive combination of expertise and authenticity (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Empirical evidence supports the idea that work-related posts authored by employees can improve consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the organization, in part because employees are seen as knowledgeable, genuine voices rather than purely commercial promoters (Soens & Claeys, 2023).

Overall, SCT provides the conceptual basis for treating influencer and employee-ambassador communications as originating from sources with different—but potentially equally persuasive—credibility configurations. This distinction is central to the present thesis, which examines how source-type cues interact with message factors to shape internal consumer states and, ultimately, purchase intention.

1.4.3 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) looks at persuasion in two different ways (both of which are exhibted in scrolling behavior). The first is engaging in careful, critical consideration of the arguments presented and weighing the value of the arguments. The second is using a cognitive shortcut by obtaining quick, less meaningful information (e.g., atttactiveness, popularity, credibility)**. The first is termed the central route (considering the argument quality) and the second is the peripheral route (considering the simple cues) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The more motivation and ability some have to engage with an argument, the more relevant and logical it has to be in order to significantly change one's attitude. Conversely, the less motivated or able to engage with the argument, the more inexpensive the peripheral cues (e.g., popularity of an influencer, follower count, project aesthetics) can be. In digital commerce, the two routes don't cleanly switch. They work in conjunction. An influencer's style can simultaneously attract a follower while they are also assessing the particularity, coherence, and utility of the product claims made.

Building on this, research on social media reviews and electronic word of mouth demonstrate the relationship between the quality of arguments and the usefulness of information, information adoption, and product evaluations (Cheung et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2021; Qiu & Zhang, 2024). Carpenter (2015) ELM proclaims that there are good correlational relationships between argument quality and outcomes when elaboration is high, and that there are negative relationships when there is low elaboration and the quality of arguments is low. \ People's elaboration on

arguments in sponsored content is an extension of influencer marketing studies. Breves et al. (2024) points out that good quality arguments in sponsored content increase positive evaluations of the influencer and the brand. Nashrulloh (2025) explains that good arguments that increase perceived argument quality not only increase perceived usefulness and ease of use of the message, but increase positive attitudes towards the message and the intention to purchase. These studies contribute to the focus of this thesis on high quality arguments as part of the central route in conjunction with source cues of SCM theory. This explains the transition from social media texts to internal evaluations and the eventual intention to purchase.

1.4.4 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior is, at its core, a theory about how intentions form. Ajzen (1991) argues that behavior is most directly predicted by behavioral intention, and that intention is shaped by three familiar forces: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In advertising and digital marketing research, TPB is often used in a practical way: it helps explain why a message works only when it shifts people's evaluations in a direction that makes action feel worth taking. In this context, attitude toward the message (or attitude toward the ad) is commonly treated as a proximal determinant of purchase intention.

Evidence from social-media settings supports exactly this chain. Coutinho et al. (2023) show that influencer credibility improves attitude toward the advertisement, and that this attitude fully mediates the effect on purchase intention—suggesting that credibility alone is not enough unless the message is evaluated positively. Nashrulloh (2025) reports a parallel mechanism in viral mobile-app marketing: argument quality increases perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, which then enhances attitude toward the viral message; this attitude, in turn, strongly predicts purchase intention. Taken together, these findings echo TPB's central insight: external message characteristics matter because they reshape the internal evaluations that feed intention.

In the present thesis, TPB therefore supports treating attitude toward the message as a key mediator linking message credibility and argument quality to intention to buy across both influencer and employee-ambassador communications. Subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are not modeled explicitly; however, their influence is partly embedded in the broader social-media environment (where social proof and peer visibility are ever-present) and in the perceived feasibility of purchasing the promoted product.

1.4.5 Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Framework

The The Stimulus-Organism-Response model conceptualizes persuasion as a process instead of a simple event. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) explain this as a simple equation, where external stimuli (S) shape internal organismic (O) states and subsequently guide responses (R). For social-media persuasion, this is relatively simple. The source and the message characteristics are the stimuli, the organism is the psychological state (brand trust, attitude toward the message, perceived authenticity), and the response is the intention to purchase. The logic of recent research in digital marketing constitute S, O and R in the same way. For example, celebrities' credibility is modeled as a S that impacts internal evaluation (O) perceived trust, perceived quality of the product, influencing purchase intention ® (Hossain, 2025). Other examples include Qiu and Zhang (2024) whereby organismic diagnosis (O) and perceived usefulness of a review shape stimuli (S) that affect purchase intention (R). Overall, across this research, barriers are emotional and psychove, motivating a shift in trust and feelings toward the brand. \ For this thesis, SOR structures the process of the integrated model.

Stimuli (S) such as message credibility, quality of arguments, and brand trust along with message-related attitude and perceived authenticity as organismic states (O) are expected to influence buying intention (R). This architecture also has a place for SCT and ELM for theoretical specialization to explain which stimuli matter (who, how powerful is the message), and TPB and research on authenticity to explain which internal evaluations sustain such effects.

1.4.6 Self-Congruity Theory (SCTy)

Self-Congruity Theory which states that people are naturally inclined to gravitate toward individuals and brands that they perceive as a good fit, suggests consumers display more favorable attitudes toward brands, products, and endorsers whose image is congruent with the consumers self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Such congruence can be within the actual self (who I am), ideal self (who I want to be), or social self (how I want to be perceived). A message that "matches" one of these selves is likely to be perceived as personally relevant, a feeling often equated to authenticity. Such a message does not only persuade, it resonates. Self-congruity has also been studied in influencer marketing and is often explained through the concepts of perceived similarity and parasocial closeness.

And this closeness has been linked to greater purchase intention and stronger authenticity perceptions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). From this angle, what Audrezet et al. (2020) call authenticity

management—selecting sponsorships fitting an influencer's persona and being honest about them—may also be seen as congruity maintenance. This means keeping the influencer's persona and the endorsed product aligned and thus safeguarding their credibility. For employee ambassadors, self-congruity may arise from shared values and concerns rather than from lifestyle mimicry. When employees voice issues (e.g., product safety, sustainability, inclusivity) that feel important to customers, the communication tends to be more human and relatable as it reflects structured and consistent experience, thus authenticity and trust may be reinforced (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Soens & Claeys, 2023). Thus, Self-Congruity Theory contributes to the integrated framework by clarifying the role of identity alignment which is also central to attitude and purchase intention prediction: it helps determine when persuasive message is self-evidently "truthful" from the communicator perspective to which it is closely aligned, and when it is "true" to the audience, which is particularly relevant to the communications of both the influencer and the employee-ambassador.

1.4.7 Integrated Conceptual Model

Putting all five perspectives together, the model in this thesis is basically a **simple story with three steps**: something in the message happens (**Stimulus**), it changes what the consumer thinks and feels (**Organism**), and that change shows up in what the consumer intends to do (**Response**).

1) Stimuli (S): what the audience sees and hears

Guided by Source Credibility Theory and the ELM, the main "inputs" are:

- **Message credibility** (how believable the communicator and the message feel—driven by expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity cues), and

- **Argument quality** (how strong the content is—how informative and persuasive the reasons are).

These cues appear in two different source types—influencers and employee ambassadors—and the two sources tend to look credible in different ways (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Belanche et al., 2021; Soens & Claeys, 2023).

2) Organism (O): what changes inside the consumer

Drawing on TPB, SOR, and authenticity research, the model focuses on three internal states that usually do the "heavy lifting" in persuasion:

- **Perceived brand trust**

- **Attitude toward the message** (how much the person likes/approves of the post)
- **Perceived authenticity** (whether the message and the messenger feel genuine)

Prior studies repeatedly show that these variables often carry the effects of source/message cues onto purchase-related outcomes in digital contexts (Dam, 2020; Coutinho et al., 2023; Napoli et al., 2014; Gohil et al., 2025).

3) Response (R): what the consumer intends to do

Following TPB and SOR, the final outcome here is intention to buy—the immediate behavioral intention that sits closest to actual purchasing (Ajzen, 1991; Qiu & Zhang, 2024).

One extra layer: self-congruity runs through the whole system

Self-congruity is treated as a cross-cutting mechanism: when the influencer's or employee's image feels like a good "fit" with the consumer's self-concept, authenticity and trust become easier to build (Sirgy, 1982; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In other words, congruity helps the message feel more personally "right," which often strengthens persuasion.

Overall, the model allows for:

- direct effects of message credibility and argument quality on intention to buy,
- indirect effects through brand trust, message attitude, and perceived authenticity, and
- possible source-type differences (influencer vs. employee ambassador) in how strong these paths are.

1.4.8 Section Conclusion

This integrated framework places the thesis at a meeting point where communication psychology, consumer-behavior theory, and digital marketing speak the same language. It makes one thing clear: persuasion in social media is rarely the result of a single shining ingredient. It is not only the influencer's charisma and reach, nor only the employee's insider expertise. Rather, it is the *combination*—how credibility is earned, how arguments are built, and how these cues travel inward to shape what consumers come to trust, like, and believe is real. Through perceived brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity, source credibility and argument quality ultimately converge on the same destination: intention to buy (Dam, 2020; Coutinho et al., 2023; Qiu & Zhang, 2024).

By weaving together Source Credibility Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework, and Self-Congruity Theory, this chapter offers a coherent map of the persuasive process. It explains not only *whether*

influencer and employee-ambassador communication can be effective, but *why*—and under what conditions the same message may be received as compelling, forgettable, or even suspicious. This integrated perspective now sets the stage for the next chapter, where the proposed paths are translated into testable hypotheses, and where the model is examined empirically in a marketplace that increasingly rewards messages that feel not just persuasive, but believable.

1.5 Chapter Summary, Empirical-Study Table, Conceptual-Model Placeholder, and References

1.5.1 Chapter Summary

This chapter brought together the main theories and empirical findings needed to explain how influencer and employee-ambassador communications shape consumers' intention to buy and set the stage for the empirical analyses that follow. It started by placing the focus on a market where social commerce continues to grow, and where the trust placed in advertisement forms (especially traditional ones) has become increasingly weaker (Edelman, 2021; Nielsen, 2023; Yltävä, 2025). Then, it analyzed message credibility from Source Credibility Theory (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) and demonstrated that credibility, more so trustworthiness, predicts positive outcomes in advertising for both influencers and employee advocates, especially, employees advocates who tend to have insider knowledge and are perceived to be more ad genuine (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Miles & Mangold, 2014; Soens & Claeys, 2023). The chapter than switched to the other dimension which is the strength of the message.

This study draws from a variety of sources to assess the argument quality of informativeness and persuasiveness in shaping the providers' message and evaluation of the purchase outcomes in digital surroundings (Q. Liu et al., 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). In being able to evaluate the quality of the products, the study posits the existence of three primary organism mechanisms: brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity, and explains how these internal mechanisms, particularly the attitude toward the message, result from the message and source cues, influence the purchase intention (Ajzen, 1991; Dam, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015). To conclude, these mechanisms have been incorporated into a comprehensive design along with SCT, ELM, TPB, SOR Framework, and Self-Congruity Theory, where trust, attitude, and authenticity function as organism states (O) in the framework, while intention to purchase serves as the response (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Sirgy, 1982). The chapter intends to make empirical tests by suggesting that the communication of influencers and

employee ambassadors is likely to utilize the same psychological mechanisms, albeit with different persuasive emphasis, particularly in the credibility-trust and authenticity.

This chapter amply illustrates how inattention has become so prevalent in today's world that to persuade the target audience one needs to go beyond the volume of a message. One needs to pay attention to the volume of message delivery, the credibility of the argument, and the emotional stage of the audience that makes rational purchase decisions

1.5.2 Summary Table of Key Empirical Studies

Table 3 summarizes selected empirical studies that informed the conceptual model, highlighting their contexts, methods, focal variables, and core findings.

Table 3

Selected empirical studies on influencer and employee-ambassador communication, argument quality, and purchase intention

Study (Author, Year)	Design / Context	Key finding most relevant to this thesis
Coutinho et al. (2023)	Survey; influencer advertising	Influencer credibility (esp. honesty) improves ad attitudes and increases purchase intention.
Rizma & Gunanto (2024)	Survey (Gen Z); social media endorsements	Influencer trustworthiness builds brand trust, which subsequently predicts purchase intention.
Ashraf et al. (2023)	Empirical study; influencer marketing	Influencer credibility (and relational cues) increases trust and purchase decisions; credibility is a core driver.
Miles & Mangold (2014)	Conceptual + practice-oriented evidence; employee advocacy	Employees can act as authentic "insider" communicators; employee voice can strengthen credibility/trust when well-governed.
Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė (2022)	Case study; employee-brand ambassador communication	Employee-ambassador communication increases customer interest and trust (effects on intention may vary by context).
Soens & Claeys (2023)	Experimental/empirical; employee work-related social media	Employee posts can shape external stakeholder attitudes and behavioural intentions toward the organisation/brand.
Liu et al. (2021)	Empirical; online reviews/eWOM	Argument quality (informativeness & persuasiveness) increases perceived

Study (Author, Year)	Design / Context	Key finding most relevant to this thesis
		usefulness/adoption of content, improving evaluations.
Qiu & Zhang (2024)	Meta-analysis; online reviews across contexts/cultures	Online review/message characteristics show robust links to purchase intention; effects vary by context/culture.
Alzate et al. (2021)	Panel/field evidence; review richness & sales	Richer/more diagnostic review content predicts sales outcomes, supporting "content quality → behavioural response" logic.

Source: Compiled by the author.

1.5.3 Conceptual-Model Figure Placeholder

The conceptual-model diagram will be included in the final thesis. The model represents the integrated frameworks of Section 1.4 using an S–O–R Structure. Stimuli (exogenous variables):

Message Credibility (both influencer and employee-ambassador messages source-credibility cues)

Argument Quality (message informativeness and persuasion)

Organism (mediators):

Brand Trust

Attitude Toward The

Message Authenticity (both brand and communicator)

Response (outcome): Intent to purchase the product being promoted.

The model addresses the influencers and employee-ambassador conditions by suggesting that source type is a moderator of (a) the paths from credibility and argument quality to the mediators and (b) the paths from the mediators to intent to purchase (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Belanche et al. 2021; Soens & Claeys 2023).

2 METHODOLOGICAL PART

2.1 Research Objective and Overview

This chapter explains how the study was designed and executed to test the integrated model developed in Chapter 1. In brief, the study examines—using a sample of European adults—how source type (influencer vs. employee ambassador) and two key message features (message credibility and argument quality) relate to three internal consumer states (brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity) and, ultimately, intention to buy.

Methodologically, the study follows the S–O–R logic established earlier: source and message cues are treated as the external stimuli, trust/attitude/authenticity as the organismic responses, and purchase intention as the focal outcome. The analysis therefore focus on (a) whether credibility and argument quality predict the three internal states, (b) whether these states statistically transmit effects to purchase intention (mediation), and (c) whether any of these paths differ by source type (influencer vs. employee ambassador).

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. Section 2.2 mentions the research design and overall approach. Section 2.3 shows the research model, and Section 2.4 shows the detail about the hypothesis development. Section 2.5 outlines construct operationalization and measurement instruments. Section 2.6 describes the sample, sampling method, and data-collection procedure. Section 2.7 presents data analysis proposal (SPSS and AMOS) and section 2.8 menations ethical considerations.

2.2 Research Design and Approach

2.2.1 Research Paradigm

This research employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design with an experimental element. The approach is one of deduction and theory-driven, in an attempt to test the hypotheses developed from the literature. The underlying paradigm is post-positivist in that the emphasis is on the objective measurement of latent constructs and the testing of statistical hypotheses. This research design will be appropriate in testing associative relationships among multiple variables— credibility, trust, authenticity—and allowing for the assessment of a putative model at one point in time only and without longitudinal follow-up. Numerical data at one point in time provide the means for statistical tests of relationship strength and significance consistent with theoretical expectations. Because the nature of the design is cross-sectional, no actual causal language is possible, but this design may allow for theory testing in the form of whether the associations found

support the conceptual model. The approach here is basically in line with prior consumer research in terms of consideration of how message and source factors jointly affect attitudes and intentions, such as studies of social media influence and persuasion.

2.2.2 Justification for Survey Method

The reasons for choosing the online self-administered questionnaire as the primary data collection method are varied. First, given that the research questions are focused on the content of social media advertising and influencer/ambassador posts, the target population is online; an Internet survey reaches the respondent in their natural habitat. Second, it allows for effective access to a large sample of dispersed social media users with a relatively low cost. As compared to face-to-face or paper-and-pencil methods, Web-based surveys have no limitations concerning location and can gather information quickly and at low costs (Wright, 2005). For example, Wright (2005) mentions that online questionnaires allow reaching a broad audience with lesser time and expense. This method will allow for controlled stimuli to be embedded. For example, subjects can be randomly exposed to one of two digital versions of content—that is, either an influencer or employee-ambassador mock social media post—and then immediately answer questions about their perception of the content, which would be impractical using the traditional off-line method. Another advantage is that online questionnaire provide convenience for the participants to answer at anytime from anywhere. Overall, the online survey method fits this study's needs especially well due to convenience, scalability, and the necessity of presenting visual stimuli uniformly across all participants. Presenting messages from influencers versus employee-ambassadors while maintaining experimental control is more complex and subject to bias when conducted without the benefit of an online environment. Therefore, using an Internet survey on a platform well-known to users was an effective means of collecting valid data from the target population while controlling the presentation of influencer messages versus employee-ambassadors.

2.3 Integrated Research Model

2.3.1 Conceptual Model Description

The focus of this thesis includes a conceptual framework understanding the construct's (Figure 2.1) focus on the provision of signals that stream to the user's device and impact what individuals choose to trust, what they choose to believe, and what they ultimately decide to buy. This framework displays the interrelationships of the source and the content and aims to elucidate the connections that link social media communication to purchase intention (Coutinho et al., 2023;

Liu & Zheng, 2024). of social media communication. Message credibility and argument quality, as the two primary stimuli, signal the noisy scroll of the social media feed. They signal the construct as a passive mover and active agent of internal narrative transformation. This construct does not operate independently (Absar et al., 2024; Blanco-Encomienda & Rosillo-Díaz, 2025). The source of the message, such as an influencer or a brand representative, introduces a passive construct that directs the audience's framing of the message, thus enhancing its impact or reducing its impact. Once the message crosses the psychological boundary of the user, the consumer's internal processes of trust toward the brand, cognitive response to the message, and subjective response to the message as authentic, are activated.

These aren't simply variables; they are the emotional and cognitive remnants that travel through the cognitive circuit and represent different dimensions of how the consumer metabolizes the stimulus. Each one captures a facet of the consumer self-positing in relation to the variables at hand, which resonates with the research indicating that credible and informative content assimilated and interacted with increases the trust, likeability, and perceived realism of the communication (Absar et al., 2024; Bui et al., 2025; Napoli et al., 2014). These internal processing variables coalesce at the purchase intention. It is at this point that the organism closes the circuit by integrating all variables, metabolizing the stimulus, and responding. It has been shown in numerous studies that when trust is earned, an attitude shift is observed, and when authenticity is sensed, the intention to buy is often recorded (Blanco-Encomienda & Rosillo-Díaz, 2025; Bui et al., 2025; Coutinho et al., 2023). Statistically speaking, trust, attitude, and authenticity are the mediators that operate with minimal friction to guide the influence of the message to the behavioral endpoint. But the map is bifurcated.

The model focuses on source type as a category variable, allowing us to ask: does the same message delivered by a relatable employee, compared to a refined influencer, evoke different reactions? Early data collected suggests it does (Izwan & Baharom, 2024). Employees as simple company functionaries are now viewed as credible brand representatives—individuals whose grounded demeanor engenders more trust and authenticity (Smith et al., 2021; E. Soens & A.-S. Claeys, 2023). Therefore, what we are allowing in this model is more than the testing of a hypothesis; it is the testing of a hypothesis in the context of structure: Do the ribs of persuasion change when the voice does? Is the insider's voice more likely to elicit trust and authenticity than the outsider's, no matter how charismatic they are? Using the simple Stimulus–Organism–

Response (S-O-R) model, we present message credibility and quality as the external stimuli, brand trust, attitude, and authenticity as the organism's internal states, and purchase intention as the outcome (Blanco-Encomienda & Rosillo-Díaz, 2025; Bui et al., 2025; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

2.3.2 Theoretical Foundations of the Model

Multiple theoretically sound theories underpin the development of the research model. The foundation of SCT directs the consideration of how source type and message perceived credibility elicit audience responses. Source Credibility Theory has its genesis in Hovland and Weiss (1951), and maintains that communicator variables such as expertise and trustworthiness do have an impact on the persuasiveness of the message. In the context of this research, an influencer and an employee-ambassador would each be perceived as credible along different dimensions: influencers strive to gain trust from their audiences through relatability and interpersonal appeal; employee-ambassadors may be trusted because of their insider knowledge and authenticity as representatives of the brand. The work of McCroskey (1999) on source credibility—including goodwill—also suggests that audiences respond more positively to communicators who appear to genuinely care and convey honesty, which can probably be more associated with employee-ambassadors entwined within company culture.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by Petty and Cacioppo (2012) forms the basis for investigating argument quality as a central route cue. According to ELM, when consumers are both motivated and able to process information, the strength and quality of the arguments—including, for example, factual content and logical reasoning—of a message become crucial determinants of persuasion. In this study, the argument quality is defined by how informative and persuasive the post's content is, following the two-dimensional conceptualization by J. Liu et al. (2021). This concept also resonates with the Information Adoption Model, where it is emphasized that credible information and strong arguments are crucially important in increasing information usefulness and acceptance (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Therefore, ELM and related models predict that higher argument quality will lead to more positive attitudes and greater trust in the brand by engaging rational processing.

It also incorporates the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) by Ajzen (1991) that describes the function of attitudes in molding behavioral intentions. According to TPB, an individual's intention to perform a behavior, such as buying, is directly influenced by his or her attitude toward the behavior (in this context, operationalized as attitude toward the promotional message or ad)

and subjective norms and perceived control. Although norms and control are beyond the scope of the current study, the incorporation of attitude toward the message as a mediator illustrates the TPB presumption that favorable evaluation of the communication will result in higher purchase intention. In simple words, the receiver is more likely to consider buying the product if the social media post is liked and found appealing (Spears & Singh, 2004).

Both the SCT and the broader marketing theory support the idea of brand trust as a mediator. Brand trust is conceptually associated with source credibility – credible sources can increase trust in the brand they promote. Moreover, brand trust has been regarded as a central concept in relationship marketing and has been connected to purchase intention as well as loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). Brand trust increases the possibility that a credible message would make consumers more confident of the brand's reliability and integrity, which increases the drive to purchase (as also verified in findings on e-commerce trust and behavior by Pavlou (2003)).

Perceived authenticity is rooted in theories of self-congruity and authenticity in branding. Authenticity in marketing denotes being true to one's claimed identity or values (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). We draw on the notion that an employee-ambassador's message may thus inherently appear more authentic—since employees are "real" insiders—and that authenticity resonates with consumer's desire for authentic, honest communication. Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982) further suggests that messages are more persuasive when the source or content of a message aligns with the consumer's self-image; an authentic message may foster such a connection. Recent studies of social media influencer communications (Lee & Eastin, 2021) also emphasize authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct—sincerity, transparency, etc.—that drives audience engagement. Thus, inclusion of perceived authenticity in the model is theoretically justified as an "organismic" mediator able to translate message/source qualities into a heightened willingness to buy.

Altogether, the structure of the model follows an S–O–R framework: message credibility and argument quality (stimuli) lead to internal states (trust, attitude, authenticity), which in turn lead to the response (purchase intention). This framework is enriched by the above theories: SCT for source credibility, ELM for argument quality, TPB for the attitude-intention link, and authenticity/self-congruity theories regarding the role of authenticity in consumer responses.

2.3.3 Conceptual Model Figure

Figure 1 offers more than a diagram—it is an anatomical map of psychological influence. In this schematic, we see the conceptual body of the study laid bare: its origins, organs, and intended motion traced in lines and logic.

At the left flank, we find the twin initiators of cognitive disturbance—message credibility and argument quality. These are the catalysts, the spark and the signal, functioning as independent variables. They enter the perceptual bloodstream of the receiver, carrying with them assumptions of truth, logic, and believability.

Hovering just above them, almost spectral in placement, is the source type—not an active causal agent in the same way, but a contextual shifter. Like a lens changing the way light refracts, this binary condition (influencer vs. employee-ambassador) overlays and alters how the messages below are received, interpreted, and internalized. It is the voice behind the message, and its presence may modulate everything that follows.

At the model's core, three psychological constructs form the beating heart of the framework:

- Brand Trust (H1a, H2a)
- Attitude Toward the Message (H1b, H2b)
- Perceived Authenticity (H1c, H2c)

These are not mere mediators; they are the organismic responses—subtle shifts in the internal state of the consumer once the stimuli are processed. Trust speaks to reliability. Attitude reflects affective alignment. Authenticity points to the perceived sincerity of the message. Together, they embody the organismic reaction in the classic Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model.

From each of these psychological nodes, arrows stretch rightward toward the final frontier: Intention to Buy (H3a, H3b, H3c). This is the behavioral echo, the externalized choice. If the system has been properly engaged—if the stimuli are potent, the organismic response favorable— then intention manifests as the culmination of the internal chain reaction.

But the model does not stop at direct effects. It recognizes the subtler dance of indirect influence: the mediated hypotheses, represented by the implied paths threading from credibility and argument quality through trust, attitude, and authenticity, and on to behavioral intent. These pathways capture the nuance—the notion that persuasion is rarely linear, but often filters through layers of interpretation and belief.

Finally, there is one more dimension lurking in the figure: multi-group comparison. This comparative lens (H5) allows us to ask: *Does it matter who speaks?* Is the employee—a figure from inside the citadel—more credible, more authentic, more trust-inducing than the influencer—glamorous, charismatic, but external? The model dares to ask whether source type is not merely context, but catalyst.

In sum, the figure encodes a theory of influence—one where message quality, source characteristics, and perceived authenticity are all moving parts in a machine designed to shape intention. It reflects a world where digital voices are many, but only some move hearts—and wallets.

Figure 1

Conceptual research model of the study (schematic)
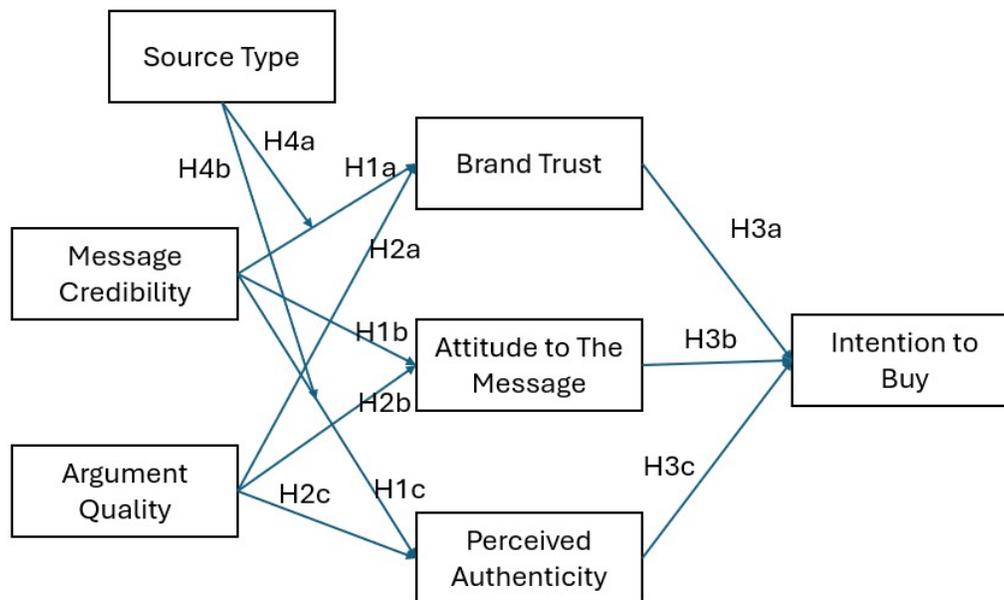
Source: Compiled by the author.

2.4 Hypotheses Development

Armed through a multi-layered theoretical arsenal—from Source Credibility Theory (SCT) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, and Self-Congruity Theory—we now draw the battle lines. What follows are not mere hypotheses, but tactical assertions grounded in decades of psychological theory and empirical intelligence.

Message as Signal: Credibility and Argumentation

In the shadows of Hovland and Weiss (1951), credibility acts as a trusted blade—forged from perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—capable of piercing cognitive defences and reshaping attitudes. The higher the message credibility, the stronger its impact on psychological receptivity. This is consistent with SCT and confirmed in digital terrains where credible voices command trust and drive purchase intention (Cheung et al., 2009; Coutinho et al., 2023; Hossain et al., 2025; Liu & Zheng, 2024; Lou & Yuan, 2019; McCroskey, 1999; Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004).

Equally powerful is argument quality—the substance beneath the sound. When central-route processing is activated (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012), well-reasoned, information-rich arguments bypass emotional noise and root themselves in rational evaluation. Studies on eWOM and viral marketing show that when the logic is strong, the reaction is stronger—users not only listen, they act (Hussain et al., 2017; J. Liu et al., 2021; Nashrulloh, 2025; Sussman & Siegal, 2003).

Thus, the first wave of hypotheses follows the path of stimuli to psychological response:

- **H1a.** Message credibility positively influences brand trust.
- **H1b.** Message credibility positively influences attitude toward the message.
- **H1c.** Message credibility positively influences perceived authenticity.
- **H2a.** Argument quality positively influences brand trust.
- **H2b.** Argument quality positively influences attitude toward the message.
- **H2c.** Argument quality positively influences perceived authenticity.

Organismic State: Trust, Attitude, and Authenticity as Catalysts

Here, the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) takes hold. Stimuli are only as powerful as the internal states they awaken. Drawing from TPB (Ajzen, 1991), trust, attitude, and authenticity emerge as proximal precursors—the psychological levers between cognition and behavior.

Trust is not a given—it is earned. Previous studies show that brand trust correlates strongly with preference, loyalty, and buying intentions (Cuong, 2020; Pavlou, 2003). Similarly, positive attitudes toward a message open the door to behavioural intention (Nashrulloh, 2025; Spears & Singh, 2004). And authenticity, the elusive glow of being "real", has proven its persuasive strength in branding and influencer contexts alike (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014; Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

Thus:

- **H3a.** Brand trust positively influences intention to buy.
- **H3b.** Attitude toward the message positively influences intention to buy.
- **H3c.** Perceived authenticity positively influences intention to buy.

Contextual Lens: Source Type as a Modulator

And now we enter the variable with a shifting face: source type—the influencer or the insider. Through the lens of Self-Congruity Theory (Sirgy, 1982), it is not only what is said, but who says it, that determines resonance. Influencers wield the power of parasocial bonds, crafting identity mirrors that audiences wish to enter (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Employees, in contrast, carry institutional truth in their voice, perceived as authentic conduits of brand identity (Lee & Kim, 2020; Miles & Mangold, 2014; Napoli et al., 2014; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020).

The model assumes these figures alter the terrain on which messages land—thus, we propose:

- H4a. The effect of message credibility on brand trust, attitude, and authenticity is moderated by source type (influencer vs. employee-ambassador).
- H4b. The effect of argument quality on brand trust, attitude, and authenticity is moderated by source type.
- H4c. Perceived authenticity mediates the positive relationships between (a) message credibility and purchase intention and (b) argument quality and purchase intention.
  And finally:
- H5. The strength of the structural relationships in the model differs between influencer and employee-ambassador conditions, such that employees may generate stronger effects on perceived authenticity, brand trust, and intention to buy.
  Following the broader assertion in H5, which proposes that the overall strength of structural relationships may vary depending on whether the message originates from an influencer or an employee-ambassador, we now specify this comparative hypothesis into two distinct strands (De Veirman et al., 2017). These allow for targeted empirical testing of how source type alters the impact of credibility and perceived authenticity—two of the model's most potent psychological constructs:

H5a. Employee-ambassador messages are associated with higher perceived authenticity than influencer messages.

This hypothesis reflects the proposition that messages coming from employees—those embedded within the organizational fabric—are perceived as more genuine, sincere, and credible in intent than those from external influencers, who may be seen as compensated agents. Rooted in authenticity theory and Self-Congruity Theory (Sirgy, 1982; Morhart et al., 2015), the expectation is that audiences interpret insider voices as more aligned with the brand's actual identity, which in turn enhances authenticity perception.

If supported, the data would show a main effect of source type on authenticity scores, with the employee-ambassador condition yielding significantly higher ratings than the influencer condition.

H5b. The positive association between message credibility and brand trust is stronger for employee-ambassador messages than for influencer messages.

While message credibility is expected to positively influence brand trust across both source types (per SCT and prior empirical work), this hypothesis proposes a moderation effect: that this relationship is stronger when the source is an employee. The rationale is that credibility cues (e.g., accuracy, coherence, honesty) may be more impactful when delivered by a source already perceived as intrinsically trustworthy due to their role inside the organization (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020).

In contrast, influencers—even when credible—operate in a more commercialized, performance-based domain. Their perceived authenticity may be limited by perceptions of sponsorship, then make their credibility-to-trust conversion rate lower than employees'.

This hypothesis aligns with SCT, relationship marketing, and organizational advocacy literature, where insider status may enhance the persuasive weight of message cues.

2.5 Operationalisation of Constructs

2.5.1 Main Constructs

Every theoretical construct for the purposes of this study were captured using established, multi-item scales from prior studies to ensure content validity. With the exception of attitude toward the message, which utilized semantic differential items, each construct was evaluated using items on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This is characterized by the stronger the score, the greater presence of the underlying construct. Some slight alterations

in phrasing were made to contextualize the items to influencer versus employee-ambassador social media posts and were not intended to change their meaning. A detailed description of items, construct, and their corresponding original scales is presented in Table 4. Before analysis, internal consistency of each construct, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, and the degree of unidimensionality will be assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The following are the constructs measured in this study:

• Credibility of the message: The degree to which the post was perceived as accurate, believable, and trustworthy (Cheung et al., 2009; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000).

• Argument evaluation (Informativeness & Persuasiveness): The posts are informative and persuasive, gauged along two separate spectrums from J. Liu et al. (2021).

• Brand trust: The participants' trust in the brand's competence and goodwill, drawing from the works of Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001).

• Attitude toward the message: Assessment of the post in general, using four pairs of bipolar adjectives from Spears and Singh (2004).

• Perceived authenticity: The extent to which the post and the author are perceived to be honest, real, and unscripted and promotional, based on Napoli et al. (2014) and Morhart et al. (2015).

• Purchase intention: Self-estimated chance of buying the promoted product, based on the standard three items by Spears & Singh (2004).

All of the scales had high reliability (generally α ≥.80) in previous studies and will be expected to do so in the current study as well.

Table 4

Overview of Constructs, Questionnaire Items, and Scale Sources

Construct	Items (English wording used in the questionnaire)	Source (author, year)
Message credibility	1. "The information in this post seems accurate." 2. "The information in this post is believable." 3. "The information in this post is trustworthy." 4. "The information in this post is reliable."	Flanagin & Metzger (2000); Cheung et al. (2009)
Argument quality – Informativeness	1. "This post provides enough information for me to evaluate the product." 2. "This post contains detailed information about the product." 3. "This post is informative."	Liu et al. (2021)

Construct	Items (English wording used in the questionnaire)	Source (author, year)
Argument quality – Persuasiveness	1. "The arguments in this post are persuasive." 2. "The arguments in this post are convincing." 3. "This post gives strong reasons to consider this product."	Liu et al. (2021)
Brand trust	1. "I trust this brand to keep its promises." 2. "This brand is reliable." 3. "I feel confident in this brand." 4. "I believe this brand has my best interests at heart."	Delgado-Ballester (2004); Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)
Attitude toward the message	Semantic differential items (7-point scales): 1. "My overall evaluation of this post is:" bad – – – – – – good 2. "This post is:" unappealing – – – – – – appealing 3. "This post is:" unfavorable – – – – – – favorable 4. "This post is:" boring – – – – – – – interesting	Spears & Singh (2004)
Perceived authenticity	1. "This post seems authentic rather than staged." 2. "The person in this post appears sincere." 3. "This post feels genuine rather than purely promotional." 4. "The person in this post seems honest about their experience with the product."	Napoli et al. (2014); Morhart et al. (2015)
Purchase intention (intention to buy)	1. "I would consider buying this product." 2. "It is likely that I would purchase this product." 3. "I intend to buy this product in the near future."	Spears & Singh (2004)

Source: Compiled by the author.

2.5.2 Source Type (Experimental Condition) and Manipulation Check

In the theatre of persuasion, who speaks is often more potent than what is said. Thus, in this study, source type—whether the post came from an influencer or a employee-ambassador—was not only a variable, but a mask, deliberately chosen and precisely placed.

Rather than measuring perceptions, we manipulated identity: a between-subjects experimental design randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions. Each participant viewed a fabricated social-media post, indistinguishable in every surface feature—layout, image, caption length, and core message remained constant. Only the identity cues shifted: the account handle, a brief role descriptor, and a short self-introduction subtly whispered, I am an influencer, or I speak from inside the company.

This manipulation was inspired by techniques in prior research where source was used as a silent lever of influence (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2020; Soens & Claeys, 2023). Here, we crafted not just content, but contextual illusion.

To ensure the illusion held, a manipulation check followed the exposure. Participants answered:

One categorical question:

"Who do you think posted this content?" (Influencer / Employee / Other / Not sure)

Two 7-point Likert items:

"The person in this post is a company employee."

"The person in this post is a professional influencer."

These items served not to build a scale, but to confirm the spell was cast correctly. As source type was assigned, not measured, internal reliability was irrelevant. The binary condition was encoded for analysis as 0 = influencer, 1 = employee-ambassador—a choice, a fork in the cognitive path.

2.5.3 Stimulus Product

A spell must have a focus. This experiment, the chosen artifact was a multi-function electric rice cooker—simple, domestic, and powerfully neutral. Similar with a mirror in a haunted house, it reflects what we want the viewer to see.

This product was selected for 2 reasons:

It is familiar within people, even mundane—no need for explanation.

It doesn't have gender feature, niche exclusivity, or luxury distractions (Biondi, 2019; Chung & Cho, 2017; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Lee & Cho, 2010).

Most crucially, it fits both masks:

The influencer can pose with it in a sleek, curated kitchen.

The employee can explain it in clean, instructional tones (Lee & Cho, 2010).

The stimulus post was constructed to mimic native social-media content. It combined:

A product photo set in a modern kitchen backdrop.

A short caption outlining practical features (e.g., capacity, heating modes, timer).

A fictional brand label, crafted specifically to eliminate the ghost of prior brand bias.

What participants saw was not a product pitch—it was a controlled fragment of reality, dressed as something casual and scrollable. But beneath that image was a question: Do you trust this more, because of who shared it?

Figure 2

Image of a rice cooker

The image is shown in Figure 2

Source: Internet.

2.5.4 Demographic and Background Variables

Beyond the primary constructs of persuasion and perception lies another essential layer: who are we speaking to?

Not every message strikes the same chord in every heart. Thus, this study gathers demographic and behavioural background variables—not to interrogate, but to illuminate the human terrain we are working within:

Age: Age is captured using ordered categories rather than exact numbers—striking a balance between analytical utility and respondent anonymity. It allows us to see generational contours without peering too closely.

Gender: Male and Female.

Employment status: Participants are asked to indicate their current role: Full-time student; Employed (full-time or part-time); Self-employed; Not currently employed; Others.

Daily time spent using social media: less than 1 hour, 1–2 hours, 2–4 hours, more than 4 hours)

All the constructs are shown in Annex 1 and Annex 2.

2.6 Sampling Strategy, and Data Collection

2.6.1 Sampling

In this study, adults aged 18 and above, residing in Europe, and may active participants in the social-media sphere. They were not passive viewers—they were potential decision-makers, attuned to the subtle signals of digital influence, and capable of discerning who speaks with conviction, and who echoes for coin.

Given the absence of a comprehensive registry of European social-media users (an elusive beast, even for modern hunters), the sampling frame emerged organically—from the networks and threads that bind online communities together.

A non-probability sampling strategy was adopted, combining:

(1) Convenience sampling via the researcher's personal and professional circles.

(2) Snowball recruitment, in which each participant became a potential herald—invited to forward the questionnaire link to others who would fit the criteria.

The survey was disseminated through common social channels: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp group chats—platforms where influence travels quickly, and trust often rides on a name.

Once participants entered the survey, they were randomly assigned—quietly, invisibly—to one of the two experimental conditions: influencer or employee-ambassador. While the initial sample was non-random, the internal randomisation of exposure allowed for valid comparative inference between groups.

Sample Size: Structure Before Scale

The intended sample was approximately 300 completed responses—a balance between feasibility and methodological rigour. This figure aligns with structural equation modeling (SEM) recommendations for moderately complex models and allows for group comparisons (approximately 150 per condition) (Wolf et al., 2013). Since every question in the questionnaire is mandatory, questionnaires with too many repeated options (more than 15 questions) will be discarded, except for those participants who drop out midway.

While the sample is not statistically representative of all European users—a common limitation in digital fieldwork—it serves the study's primary purpose: theory testing and analytical generalisation, rather than population estimation (Comrey & Lee, 2013; Kline, 2023; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

2.6.2 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was designed not as a formality, but as a deliberate entry point into a controlled encounter with persuasion. The questionnaire—hosted on Google Forms— which was accessible across both desktop and mobile devices, and remained quietly available to the public for just under three weeks in November 2025.

Participants first arrived at a digital threshold: a consent page outlining their rights, the study's intent, and rights of anonymity. Only after they actively agreed could they proceed, stepping into a world designed to mirror the casual, unassuming scroll of a real social-media feed.

Once inside, they were randomly ushered into one of two realities. Some met a post shared by a charismatic influencer; others, by a company's own employee-ambassador. The image, caption, and promotional content were held constant across both versions—only the identity of the speaker shifted, subtly, like a change in lighting. A name, a descriptor, a tone. That was all. And yet, that was everything.

After exposure to the stimulus, participants completed the main set of psychological measures in a structured sequence: message credibility, argument quality, brand trust, attitude toward the message, perceived authenticity, and purchase intention. Where suitable, limited block randomisation was applied to reduce potential order effects. An attention-check item was embedded to screen for careless responding.

Following the main scales, participants answered manipulation-check items to assess whether they correctly perceived the source of the post. Demographic and behavioural background questions were placed at the end to minimise priming effects. These included age group, gender, education, employment status, social-media usage habits, and online shopping behaviour.

The survey link was distributed via social media and messaging channels—including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp—using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. A reminder was shared approximately one week after the initial distribution to boost participation.

All responses were automatically recorded and exported for analysis in SPSS and AMOS, in accordance with the ethical and data protection procedures outlined in Section 2.8.

2.7 Data Preparation and Analysis Plan

Prior to the hypothesis testing, I conducted a first-level screening to confirm the integrity of the data. Since the survey employed a forced response mechanism, no missing data was

attributes to the survey questions. Multiple quality control measures were implemented (e.g., response patterns, completion filter logic, attention checks, and response time). Analysis was performed with IBM SPSS for descriptive stats, and reliability, and for group mean comparisons, and with AMOS for CFA and SEM. I employed Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the data. For the main constructs of the study, I calculated descriptive statistics (M, SD) and the Pearson r correlation coefficient. I used SEM to evaluate H1a–H3c and reported chi-square/df, CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR for model fit, while R^2 was reported for explained variance. I tested for mediation of H4a–H4c using bootstrapping on specific indirect effects. For H5a, I tested the effect of source type using independent samples t-tests, while for H5b, I used multi-group SEM with constrained paths. I set the threshold for statistical significance to p = .05.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The University Research Ethics Committees reviewed and approved the study protocols and materials as per the institutional guidelines and the Declaration of Helsinki (Approval No.: 2025_022). All participants took part in the study voluntarily. Participants were guided through an information sheet that outlined the study's aims and objectives, procedures, study completion time, study-related risks, and study-related participant rights, prior the study beginning to collect data. Before participants could proceed, they were asked to give informed consent electronically. Participants were told that if they wished to stop participation at any point, they could do so by closing the survey. No information that could be used to identify participants (such as name, email address, or phone number) as well as IP addresses, were recorded. The survey's developer made it possible to collect survey responses entirely anonymously (Wright, 2005). Only the researcher and the supervisor had access to the data, which were kept stored securely. Only data in aggregate form were reported. The study entailed minimal risk. Participants were asked to evaluate and indicate whether they would be likely to purchase social media posts and fill in evaluative measures, which do not involve any sensitive information or issues.

3 RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Sample Characteristics

After excluding questionnaires that were not filled out carefully, a total of 312 valid questionnaires were collected for descriptive statistical analysis, with an effective response rate of 92.3%. Participants were evenly distributed into two experimental groups (influencer group and employee ambassador group) to ensure a balanced sample size. The sample mainly consisted of young people, with a mean age of 27.3 years (standard deviation = 5.87), with women making up the majority (70.8%), men (27.9%), and non-binary/other genders (1.3%). The two largest groups were Full-time employees (44.6%) and students (37.5%), and the remaining participants being part-time workers or currently unemployed. Most participants reported that they used social media at a moderate to high frequency, with over 70% using social media for 1 to 4 hours daily, and a small percentage using it for more than 4 hours daily. As shown in Table 5, this distribution indicates that the sample has a high level of digital engagement, making it very suitable for studying the dissemination of messages through social media. Preliminary tests showed that key outcome variables (e.g., credibility, trust, purchase intention) did not differ significantly between genders or age groups (all p-values were greater than 0.05), suggesting that the effects observed in subsequent analyses are unlikely to be confounded by underlying demographic differences.

Table 5

Demographic profile of respondents (N = 312)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	221	70.8
	Male	87	27.9
	Non-binary/Other	4	1.3
Employment status	Student	117	37.5
	Employed full-time	129	44.6
	Employed part-time	28	9.0
	Not currently employed	28	9.0
Daily social media use	< 1 hour	33	10.6
	1–2 hours	103	33.0
	2–4 hours	128	41.0

Variable	Category	n	%
	> 4 hours	48	15.4

Source: Compiled by the author.

3.2 Manipulation Check

To verify whether the two different scenario designs could be successfully distinguished, this study used an independent samples t-test to have participants rate the source of social media posts. In each scenario, participants were asked "1: The post is from an influencer; 2: The post is from a business ambassador (scored from 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree)."

The results showed that in the influencer scenario, participants' average score for believing a post originated from an influencer was significantly higher than that for believing it originated from an employee ambassador (M = 5.86 vs. M = 2.41, p < .001); conversely, in the employee ambassador scenario, participants' average score for believing a post originated from an employee ambassador was significantly higher than that for believing it originated from an influencer (M = 5.73 vs. M = 2.65, p < .001). This result demonstrates that the scenario design is effective in differentiating between these scenarios.

3.3 Descriptive Statistics and Scale Reliability

The descriptive statistics for both of the primary variables and the reliability of their internal consistency is found in Table 6. Overall (N = 312), average values for the message and the brand evaluations were around the middle to moderately high point of the scales (0 to 7). Argument quality showed the highest average (M = 5.08, SD = 1.01), which means that, on average, respondents felt the arguments made in the post were persuasive and informative to some degree. Positive evaluations, though at a lower average, were still above the midpoint of the scale for the attitude towards the message (M = 4.98, SD = 1.12), message credibility (M = 4.92, SD = 1.06), and \ purchase intention (M = 4.83, SD = 1.15). A little bit lower was the brand trust (M = 4.76, SD = 1.09) and perceived authenticity (M = 4.61, SD = 1.07); yet, above the midpoint provided to the scale, which showed a moderate attitude towards the brand and a belief that the post was made in good faith. Such a variation around the mean values is to be expected and can be interpreted as a normal distribution of the information (standard deviations around 1.0–1.2).

All multi-item constructs showed acceptable internal consistency as revealed by multi-item scales. Cronbach's alpha for main constructs also exceeded conventional benchmarks for scale reliability with alpha s = .74 - .84. For instance, the scale measuring attitude toward the message

and the scale measuring brand trust also exhibited sufficient reliability with .84 and .80, respectively. Concerning the scale measuring message credibility and the scale evaluating the quality of arguments presented in the message, reliability was also acceptable with .74 and .75, respectively, but the number of scale items was rather small. Additionally, the 4 items measuring perceived authenticity and the 3 items measuring purchase intention also showed satisfactory internal consistency with .74 and .79 alpha, respectively. Overall, participants evaluation of the focal constructs was positive on the average and the overall level of reliability of the scales measuring the constructs is commendable. As noted in the previous paragraph, the average values of these constructs did not differ significantly across demographic sub group which further warrants the subsequent analyses can be carried out without control for age and gender.

Table 6

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency of main constructs (N = 312)

Construct	Items	Scale Range	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Message credibility (MC)	4	1–7	4.92	1.06	0.74
Argument quality (AQ)	6	1–7	5.08	1.01	0.75
Brand trust (BT)	4	1–7	4.76	1.09	0.8
Attitude toward the message (ATM)	4	1–7	4.98	1.12	0.84
Perceived authenticity (PA)	4	1–7	4.61	1.07	0.74
Purchase intention (PI)	3	1–7	4.83	1.15	0.79

Source: Compiled by the author.

3.4 Bivariate Correlations

Table 6 shows an overview of the correlations for the primary variables. Each of the variables demonstrated a significant positive correlation, as anticipated. Message credibility (the perceived credibility of the source and the content of the post) and argument quality ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) had a moderate relationship, revealing that the more credible the post will be perceived,

the perceived argument will be stronger. Both positive assessments of the message were correlated to the outcome and the mediator variables. There was a significant correlation with message credibility for both positive ($r = .31$, $p < .001$) and negative ($r = .22$, $p < .001$) correlations and brand trust, indicating that more firmly established credibility of a message is associated with a greater trust in the brand as well as a greater inclination to purchase the product. Argument quality was related in the same way with brand trust ($r = .29$) and purchase intention ($r = .19$, $p < .001$). Brand trust, message attitude, perceived authenticity and purchase intention of the message were strong interrelated and had significant correlations among the organismic (mediating) variables.

Among them, brand trust shows the most positive relationship variable with purchase intention ($r = .46$, $p < .001$), as those who expressed trust toward the brand also expressed a higher possibility of purchase the product. Also positively correlated with purchase intention were attitude toward the message ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and perceived authenticity ($r = .44$, $p < .001$) as well. The correlation between attitude toward the message and brand trust was also positive ($r = .41$), meaning those who liked the post also trusted the brand. The smallest (yet still positive) correlation to be found was between argument quality and perceived authenticity ($r = .16$, $p < .01$), meaning the correlation is weak between the content being informative and persuasive and the audience viewing it as truly being authentic.

Additionally, the correlation matrix indicates that, while all primary variables change in the same direction (the more credible and higher the quality messages, the greater the trust and more positive attitudes, higher authenticity, and greater purchase intentions), the correlations are said to weak, meaning that each component still measures a different dimension of the persuasion process (see Table 7). There were no very high inter correlations noted (all $r < .50$), which is indicative of sufficient discriminant validity among the measures.

Table 7

Intercorrelations among main constructs (N = 312)

Variable	1. MC	2. AQ	3. BT	4. ATM	5. PA	6. PI
1. Message credibility (MC)	—					
2. Argument quality (AQ)	.36***	—				

Variable	1. MC	2. AQ	3. BT	4. ATM	5. PA	6. PI
3. Brand trust (BT)	.31***	.29***	—			
4. Attitude toward message (ATM)	.28***	.31***	.41***	—		
5.Perceived authenticity (PA)	.29***	.16**	.30***	.41***	—	
6.Purchase intention (PI)	.22***	.19***	.46***	.42***	.44***	—

Source: Compiled by the author. Note. All correlations are two-tailed. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

3.5 Structural Equation Model Results

3.5.1 Measurement Model

To assess the measuring model incorporating 6 connected latent constructs (credibility of message, quality of argument, trust of brand, attitude to message, authenticity perceived and intention to purchase; N = 312), a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. The model had good fit to data, $\chi^2(260) = 282.32$, p = .164, and had low relative chi-square (χ^2/df = 1.09). The model had good absolute fit indices showing minimal residual misfit (RMSEA = .016, SRMR = .040) and high incremental fit indices (CFI = .988, TLI = .987, NFI = .914). Fit of the model was further supported by other indices (GFI = .927, AGFI = .911), allowing for the conclusion that six-factor measurement structure was fit for further structural analyses. As shown in Table 8, all their respective latent constructs had significant loadings across all indicators (standardized loadings = .521–.775, all ps < .001) validating convergent structure of 6-factor measurement model. The latent level across constructs also had satisfactory composite reliabilities (CR = .742–.836) showing good internal consistency across.

Average variance extracted (AVE) reached or byond the .50 threshold for brand trust (AVE = .505), attitude toward the message (AVE = .561), and purchase intention (AVE = .561), while message credibility (AVE = .422), perceived authenticity (AVE = .419), and argument quality (AVE = .332) were lower than .50. This suggests that these constructs captured a lower proportion of indicator variance than the others while still having reasonably acceptable values for CR. Based on this, the loading pattern and reliability indices justify that the measurement model is sufficient for the proposed structural analyses.

Table 8

Standardized Factor Loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the Measurement Model (N = 312)

Construct	Item	Std. loading	CR	AVE	p
Message credibility (MC)	MC1	0.645	0.745	0.422	
	MC2	0.627			0.00
	MC3	0.667			0.00
	MC4	0.657			0.00
Argument quality (AQ)	AQ1	0.532	0.748	0.332	
	AQ2	0.599			0.00
	AQ3	0.521			0.00
	AQ4	0.572			0.00
	AQ5	0.631			0.00
	AQ6	0.594			0.00
Brand trust (BT)	BT1	0.714	0.803	0.505	
	BT2	0.718			0.00
	BT3	0.74			0.00
	BT4	0.67			0.00
Attitude toward the message (ATM)	ATM1	0.775	0.836	0.561	
	ATM2	0.768			0.00
	ATM3	0.725			0.00
	ATM4	0.727			0.00
Perceived authenticity (PA)	PA1	0.605	0.742	0.419	
	PA2	0.682			0.00
	PA3	0.63			0.00
	PA4	0.671			0.00
Purchase intention (PI)	PI1	0.758	0.793	0.561	
	PI2	0.727			0.00
	PI3	0.761			0.00

Source: Compiled by the author.

These findings back the scales' convergent validity. In addition, the factors were observed to correlate in moderate degrees in the predicted correlations, in line with the above bivariate relationships (there were no signs of uniqueness or extreme multicollinearity). In sum, the results of the measurement model mean that the observed variables satisfactorily captured the latent variables, thus making it reasonable to move on to the structural model in order to analyze the proposed relationships.

3.5.2 Structural Model and Mediation Effects

Testing hypotheses on stimulus-organism-response structure was done via SEM on a model that assumed direct effects from external stimuli (message credibility and argument quality) to

organismic variables (brand trust, attitude toward the message, perceived authenticity) and response variables (purchase intention) and proposed mediation effects on the response variables, also including direct effects of the stimuli to the outcome to test for direct effects. Structural model results showed good fit to the data, $\chi^2(163) = 271.89$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.952, TLI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.047 (95% CI [0.038, 0.056]), SRMR = 0.047, meaning the model accounted for reasonable variance on each of the mediators and the outcome, $R^2 = .14$ for brand trust, .13 for message attitude, .09 for perceived authenticity, .34 for purchase intention. This means that message credibility and argument quality factors together accounted for small to moderate amounts of variance in trust, attitude, and authenticity, and the three mediators explained about a third of the variance in purchase intention. Path coefficients show support for the mediation model that was proposed.

In any case, both message credibility (MC) and argument quality (AQ) were reported to influence positively, with the exception of one factor, the responses regarding the impact of the message, which were positive.

As captured quite well in Figure 3, credibility positively influenced people's brand trust ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$), message attitude ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), and perceived authenticity ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), which means that the hypothesis H1a-H1c is true. In the same fashion, argument quality positively impacted message trust ($\beta = .23$ $p < .001$) and message attitude ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$). The only link that was not significant was the one connecting argument quality with perceived authenticity ($\beta = .07$, $p = .30$, n.s.) meaning that the quality of the post's arguments did not significantly change the perceived authenticity of the message (given credibility and other variables). This means that the hypothesis H2a-H2b is supported, while the research results do not support H2c. In the following part of the model, all organismic variables significantly predicted purchase intention of the customers where brand trust positively influenced intended purchase ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), and message attitude ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$) and perceived authenticity ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) added positive value to purchase intention (supporting H5a-H5c). The message variables effects on the outcome were fully mediated by these variables.

The data shows that the route from the credibility of the message and the quality of the argument to the intention of making a purchase is practically nonexistent and holds no significance due to statistical thresholds (MC → PI: $\beta \approx -.01$, $p = .73$; AQ → PI: $\beta \approx .01$, $p = .81$). This means that the message credibility and argument quality did not influence purchase intention, and

purchase intention was only influenced through the mediators, which consist of brand trust, attitude, and perceived authenticity. Therefore, the SEM results indicate that there is the existence of a mediated S-0-R construct; that would suggest that the more credible a message was and the more quality arguments it contained, the more it resulted in trust of the brand, more of a positive reaction to the message, and perceived authenticity, thus the more it resulted in the intention to purchase the item in question.

Figure 3

Structural equation model results (standardized β coefficients).
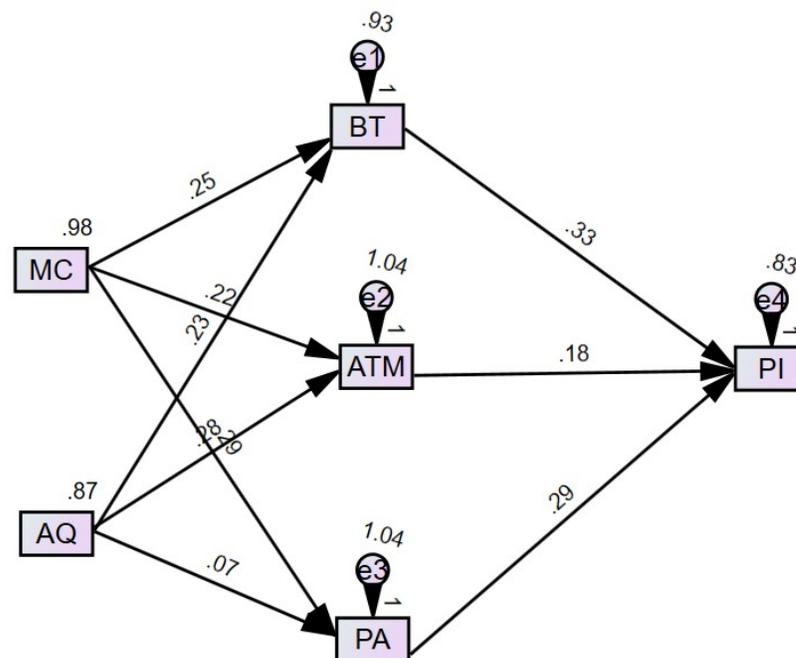
Source: Complied by the author. This path diagram illustrates the direct and indirect relationships among message credibility (MC), argument quality (AQ), the three mediating variables (brand trust, attitude toward the message, perceived authenticity), and purchase intention. Solid arrows represent significant positive paths (*p < .001), and dashed arrows represent non-significant direct effects of MC and AQ on purchase intention. All coefficients are standardized beta weights obtained from the SEM in the full sample.

It appears that the message credibility and argument quality impact on purchase intention occur mostly through brand trust, the message recipients' attitudes, and the message recipients' perceived authenticity, rather than these relationship operating as powerful direct influences. With this understanding as a guiding principles, bootstrapped indirect effect testing revealed that all three mediation hypotheses (H4a-H4c) were supported as message credibility, brand trust, purchase intention, argument quality, attitudes towards the message, the purchasing intention,

and perceived authenticity were all positively correlated, as well as, statistically and analytically supported, whereby 95% of the confidence intervals left zero out of their range.

3.6 Source-Type Effects (Moderated Mediation Analysis)

To address the research question regarding source type differences (influencer vs. employee-ambassador) in the model, additional analyses were conducted. We first examined H5a, which predicted that messages from an employee ambassador would be perceived as more authentic than those from an influencer. Then, for H5b, we tested whether the structural relationships (particularly the mediation pathways) differed between the two source conditions using multi-group SEM.

3.6.1 Perceived Authenticity by Source Type (H5a)

Messages posted by employees and ambassadors were perceived to be more authentic than messages posted by influencers. Perceived authenticity ratings were higher for employee-ambassadors (M=4.82, SD=1.03) than for influencers (M=4.40, SD=1.08). This difference is statistically significant (t(310)=3.34, p=0.001）, with a moderate effect size (Cohen's d=0.38). Thus, H5a is supported, as another company's employee led to a greater perceived authenticity as compared to a social media influencer. Mainly, participants perceived the message to be more "authentic" and "real" when coming from the employee-ambassador than when coming from an influencer.

3.6.2 Structural Model by Source Condition (H5b)

To examine whether the structural relations differed between the influencer and employee-ambassador conditions (H5b), a multi-group analysis (MGA; multi-group SEM) was conducted. The same six-factor measurement structure was specified in both groups, and the structural model was estimated separately for the influencer condition (n = 155) and the employee-ambassador condition (n = 157), with acceptable fit in each group. Overall, the pattern of significant paths was largely comparable across conditions: message credibility and argument quality showed positive effects on the mediators (except for the AQ → PA path, which was non-significant in both groups), and brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity each positively predicted purchase intention, while the direct effects of MC and AQ on purchase intention were negligible.

To investigate if the structural relationships were different in the influencer and employee ambassador conditions (H5b), a multigroup analysis (MGA); multigroupSEM was performed. Both groups were specified with the same six-factor measurement structure, and the structural

model was estimated independently for the influencer (n=155) and for the employee ambassador (n=157) conditions, with each group having a satisfactory goodness of fit.

Overall, the data outlined in the first excerpt indicate similar patterns of significant paths across conditions. Message credibility, along with argument quality, positively impacted most mediators, with the exception of the AQ ↦ PA link, which was non-significant in both groups. Purchase intention was positively predicted by brand trust, attitude towards the message, and perceived authenticity, while the effects of MC and AQ on purchase intention were almost non-existing. For the formal MGA test, the main structural paths were compared across groups where equality restrictions were placed, and changes in model fit were analyzed. Results showed the MC ↦ BT path was significantly different across source conditions.

Table 9

Standardized structural path coefficients in the influencer condition (N = 155)

Endogenous Variable	Predictor	β	p	R²
Brand trust (BT) (MC)	Message credibility	.20***	< .001	0.12
	Argument quality (AQ)	.18***	< .001	
Attitude toward message (ATM) (MC)	Message credibility	.18**	.006	0.14
	Argument quality (AQ)	.22***	< .001	
Perceived authenticity (PA) (MC)	Message credibility	.24***	< .001	0.10
	Argument quality (AQ) (n.s.)	.05	.384	
Purchase intention (PI)	Brand trust (BT)	.29***	< .001	0.32
	Attitude toward message (ATM)	.19**	.004	
	Perceived authenticity (PA)	.25***	< .001	
	Message credibility (MC) (n.s.)	.02	.731	
	Argument quality (AQ) (n.s.)	.01	.812	

Source: Compiled by the author.

Note. **β** = standardized regression weight. Significance levels (two-tailed) are indicated by **p** values and asterisks (n.s. = not significant). Each block's R^2 represents the variance explained in that endogenous construct by the predictors in the block.

Table 10

Standardized structural path coefficients in the employee-ambassador condition (N = 157)

Endogenous Variable	Predictor	β	p	R²
Brand trust (BT) (MC)	Message credibility	.30***	< .001	0.18
	Argument quality (AQ)	.16**	.008	
Attitude toward message (ATM) (MC)	Message credibility	.22***	< .001	0.16
	Argument quality (AQ)	.25***	< .001	
Perceived authenticity (PA) (MC)	Message credibility	.29***	< .001	0.11
	Argument quality (AQ) (n.s.)	.06	.341	
Purchase intention (PI)	Brand trust (BT)	.33***	< .001	0.36
	Attitude toward message (ATM)	.17**	.007	
	Perceived authenticity (PA)	.30***	< .001	
	Message credibility (MC) (n.s.)	.00	.964	
	Argument quality (AQ) (n.s.)	.05	.913	

Source: Compiled by the author.

Note. **β** = standardized regression weight. All significant paths in the employee-ambassador model mirror those in the influencer model, but the MC → BT effect is notably stronger here (β = .30 vs. .20). Multi-group tests confirmed a significant difference on that path (p < .05). Other path differences between groups were not statistically significant. All significance levels are two-tailed.

More specifically, credibility of the message predicted brand trust more strongly in the employee-ambassador group (β = .30, p < .001) compared to the influencer group (β = .20, p

< .001). Constraining this impact to be equal across groups significantly worsened model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(1)$ = 4.65, p = .031; the direct comparision of unstandardized estimates showed along the same lines (z = 2.18, p = .029). No other structural paths demonstrated significant between group differences (ps > .05). Overall, the MGA supports H5b by demonstrating that the source type moderates the impact of the credibility-to-trust linking effect, while the other relationships in the model remain the same across the two source conditions. In general, the results confirmed the hypothesized mediation process based on the S–O–R framework. Message credibility and argument quality predicted positively the organismic variables—brand trust, attitude toward the message and perceived authenticity, except that quality of argument did not positively predict perceived authenticity in either source condition, thus testifying partially to H1, H2.

As such, trust in the brand, attitude toward the message, perceived authenticity, and purchase intention were predicted to drive purchase intention, while the direct effects of message credibility and argument quality on purchase intention were negligible as these mediators were added, supporting the anticipated fully mediated pattern (H3). Bootstrapped analyses of indirect effects were consistent with these findings and substantiated the three specific mediation hypotheses (H4a–H4c) across the entire sample. When it comes to differences in source types, the employee ambassador post was perceived as more authentic than the influencer post (H5a), and the multi-group analysis (MGA) showed that the path message credibility → brand trust was significantly stronger in the employee ambassador condition than in the influencer condition (H5b), while in the other groups of the remaining structural paths, no other systematic differences were observed.

3.7 Hypotheses testing summary

Table 11

Summary of hypothesis tests

Hypothesis	Path / Comparison	Expected direction	Key evidence	p / CI	Supported
H1a	MC → BT	+	β = .20	< .001	Yes
H1b	MC → ATM	+	β = .18	.006	Yes
H1c	MC → PA	+	β = .24	< .001	Yes
H2a	AQ → BT	+	β = .18	< .001	Yes

H2b	AQ → ATM	+	β = .22	< .001	Yes
H2c	AQ → PA	+	β = .05	.384	No
H3a	BT → PI	+	β = .29	< .001	Yes
H3b	ATM → PI	+	β = .19	.004	Yes
H3c	PA → PI	+	β = .25	< .001	Yes
H4a	Indirect via BT	+	95% bootstrap CI excludes 0	CI excludes 0	Yes
H4b	Indirect via ATM	+	95% bootstrap CI excludes 0	CI excludes 0	Yes
H4c	Indirect via PA	+	95% bootstrap CI excludes 0	CI excludes 0	Yes
H5a	PA (EA) > PA (Influencer)	+	M_EA = 4.82 vs M_INF = 4.40; t(310) = 3.34	p = .001	Yes
H5b	MC → BT stronger in EA	+	Δχ²(1) = 4.65; β_EA = .30 vs β_INF = .20	p = .031	Yes

Source: Compiled by the author.

In general, the empirical findings strongly validated the proposed SCT–ELM–TPB–SOR model. There were positive correlations between message credibility and argument quality and the brand trust and attitudes toward the message. Furthermore, argument quality predicted perceived authenticity, although its pathways leading to authenticity were non-significant in both groups. Thus, H1 and H2 were mostly upheld, with the exception AQ → authenticity pathways. Purchase intention was positively predicted by brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity, and the direct effects message credibility and argument quality were shown to have on purchase intention became null after the incorporation of these mediators. This pattern of results validated H3 and the three particular mediation hypotheses were valid as well, H4a–H4c. Employee–ambassador posts were also perceived as having greater authenticity compared to the influencer posts, and paths from message credibility to brand trust were markedly stronger in the employee–ambassador condition, thus providing support toward H5a and H5b. No other structural paths varied by source type.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

This study establishes the relevant literature groundwork: consolidating the research on social media persuasion that considers "source cues" and "message cues" into a framework that centers on two major source types: influencer and employee endorsements and the primary constructs of message credibility, argument quality, brand trust, message attitude, perceived authenticity, and purchase intention. Thus, the persuasive effect in the context of Instagram depends on 'what was said' and 'who said it'. The source credibility and the message's arguments jointly influence a person's brand trust and perception of the brand's authenticity, which in turn affects their attitudes and intentions. With this groundwork in place, this study goes on to clarify the position and relationships of each of the constructs in the theoretical chain and builds an integrated model that is operationalizable and testable. The study treats message credibility and argument quality as independent variables, while brand trust, message attitude, and perceived authenticity as primary endogenous variables, and purchase intention as the ultimate dependent variable. In this way, core propositions of the SCT, ELM, TPB, and S-O-R are integrated. It also uses self-consistency orientation to close the theoretical gap regarding the evaluation of 'authenticity'.

Additionally, the model does not consider source type solely as a background variable; it also incorporates several of the source types, influencer and employee-ambassador, as potential boundary conditions for modifying the strength of the relationship in differing directions. This contributes to the overall framework being more integrative and more adaptable to the specific context. The empirical findings all largely support the above mechanism hypotheses: the positive correlation of message credibility and quality of arguments with brand trust and message attitude, and the positive correlation of these three factors with purchase intention, as well as trust and attitude with perceived authenticity. When these mediating evaluations are factored, the direct effects of message credibility and quality of arguments on purchase intention become negligible, demonstrating the theoretically anticipated framework of "indirect effects centered on evaluation variables." Concerning source differentials, employee endorsement posts are more positive with respect to perceived authenticity, and the relationship of "message credibility → brand trust" is stronger in the employee endorsement condition, which suggests that employee sources are more

positive with respect to cognitive trust and authenticity inferences. However, most of the other structural paths do not show systematic differences, which suggests that the two sources operate on a comparable persuasion framework.

It is worth noting that, regardless of the condition, the influence of the quality of arguments on perceived authenticity is not significant, indicating that a "better argument" does not mean a more authentic one. Here, the context of perceived authenticity may depend more on source-related cues and trust inferences than on the strength of the argument.

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 Theoretical implications

This research study expands the field of social media persuasive messaging by attempting to integrate social cognitive theory, the elaboration likelihood model, theory of planned behavior, and stimulant-organism-response theory into one model. Findings suggest that perceived message credibility and argument quality impacted purchase intention indirectly through brand trust, attitude toward the message, and perceived authenticity. This reflects a more organism-focused multi-stage theory of online persuasion that extends beyond simple stimulus-response explanations and previous research that explored more limited sequences of variables, such as source credibility → trust → intention, or message credibility → attitude → intention (e.g. Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Treating perceived authenticity as a separate "O" variable also contributes to the theorizing of authenticity with regards to branding and endorsement. This study confirms previous findings that theorized authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct that reinforces the consumer-brand relationship (Morhart et al., 2015) by demonstrating that perceived authenticity positively predicted purchase intention after controlling for trust and attitude. This implies that authenticity should not be considered a by-product of credibility or likability, but rather a novel psychological feature that needs to be addressed in SOR-based digital persuasion. Finally, the multi-group comparison refines the existing debates on the differences between influencers and employee ambassadors.

The same SOR mechanisms worked in both groups: message credibility and argument quality affected trust and attitudes and authenticity, which in turn affected intention, mostly consistently, regardless of source type. Meanwhile, employee posts were seen as more authentic and the effect of message credibility on brand trust was more pronounced for employees, which is consistent with the arguments that employees are viewed as well-informed insiders and "genuine"

representatives of the organization (Aydiner et al., 2019; Miles & Mangold, 2014). From a theoretical perspective, this implies that the extent to which brand trust is gained by the recipient is subject to the informal social role of the communicator when proficient communication skills are demonstrated. Models of social-media persuasion in the future may have to consider internal vs external (employees, influencers, celebrities, customers) as moderators in the credibility–trust–authenticity triad and how these roles relate to the distal vs proximal processing in the ELM. Finally, the result that argument quality did not significantly predict authenticity given credibility is controlled also somewhat constrains the conclusions drawn from classical ELM. In a brief, unchanging post, it seems that consumers tend to base authenticity assessments more on how believable the source seems, rather than how rich the arguments are.

Concerning the nature of the commercial aspects and the sensitivity of disclosure on platforms such as social media, the evidence indicates that the sense of 'realness' is most likely determined by the scaffolding (what role the individual occupies, the extent of transparency in the communication, and the tone in which they communicate) as opposed to the in-depth presentation of the product attributes. Therefore, incorporating the concept of authenticity as a variable in dual-process model of persuasion, provided the authenticity is 'real', may be beneficial for resolving the issues of the extent to which the actual message is of a primary importance as opposed to impression of peripheral, subordinate elements that elicit the sense of 'this is truly genuine'.

4.2.2 Practical implications and suggestions

The research shows social-media campaigns need to be evaluated and optimized to see if they help strengthen consumers' internal responses such as brand trust, attitude towards message, and authenticity. The model indicates that without these organismic variables, the direct relations of message credibility and the quality of message argument on purchase intention are slim to none. This shows that social commerce persuasion operates through psychological means. This coincides with trust-related persuasion that is at the core of social media persuasion, social commerce, and social commerce outcomes (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Absar, 2024). It may be more beneficial for practitioners to look at trust, attitude, and authenticity as campaign KPIs (e.g., brand-lift surveys, A/B testing) as opposed to short-term behavioral metrics such as clicks and views. This provides actionable implications of the strategic use of employee ambassadors.

Having employees submit things like posts and comments increases the authenticity of the comments and also increases the credibility-to-brand-trust link suggesting that employee voice can

be a branding tool if harnessed properly (Miles and Mangold. 2014). For companies, especially those that sell and advertise products that are complex, long-lasting, or come with risks, employees can act as ambassadors and can describe a product's features, provide insider commentary, and address customer queries in a way that addresses the concern and feels credible (or insider). In this regard, companies should be able to "employ" communication-skilled frontline employees to form ambassador programs. Companies should provide training and to encourage unscripted insider storytelling instead of communications that are highly scripted. These ideas are based on recommendations on how to manage employee social media usage (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020). However, the findings do not suggest a complete abandonment of influencers and rather show that influencer content can trigger the same trust – attitude – authenticity pathway if the influencers and the content of the post are perceived as credible and informative.

This brings additional support to the current findings that influencer credibility, along with relational dynamics, such as parasocial interactions, can enhance the development of trust and the intention to purchase (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This means that, from a managerial perspective, the focus should change from glamour and following size to fit and perceived expertise – micro-influencers that are more likely to be of the relevant category are usually the beneficiaries – and to content strategies that feature specific details of use, pros and cons, and clear disclaimers. Such strategies help safeguard influencer marketing from merely creating awareness and instead contribute to long-lasting relationships built on trust and genuine partnerships. In the context of campaign design, the conclusions suggest that messages should be optimized to address the trifecta of trust, positive attitudes toward the message, and authenticity. Trust can be bolstered with defendable claims, consistency across messages, and acknowledged conflict; positive attitudes can be facilitated by straightforwardness, ease of use, and captivating structure; authenticity can be built by transparent honesty and a distinct, relatable "voice" that shows warmth and sincerity (Morhart et al., 2015).

Based on the findings, organisations can treat these as levers they can test, for example, looking at different styles of disclosures, along with different cues from insiders, and varying levels of richness of the arguments, and then seeking to measure the differences on trust, attitude, authenticity, and eventually the intention to purchase. Since the mediation structure, at least how it is being explained, does not seem to differ between influencers and employees, organisations do not really have to view these as different strategies. Combinatorial strategies should work better,

where influencers help with reach, social proof, and initial interest, while employees enhance authenticity and help craft the information to build trust in the brand, as well as explain it in detail, and do a Q&A or follow-up. This division of labour retains the advantages of both types of sources and at the same time offers both of them to the same psychologic mechanism in the model, and should enhance both breadth and depth for trust in the model. And lastly, if indeed, the voice of the employee is to be included at scale, it requires some level of structure from the organisation. Prior work has discussed how employee social media advocacy can be either a missed opportunity or a reputational risk, depending on governance. Given these findings, organisations should have robust participation frameworks, train on conflict and confidentiality, and implement reward systems for aligned, helpful, consistent, and on-their-values communication.

In summary, the working lesson is the best messenger is not the most influential. Effective persuasion in social-media communication requires sustained, reliable, and trustworthy competent communication, be it external influencer voice or internal employee voice, that builds positive credibility over time.

4.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results of this phenomenon should be understood within the context of this study's limitations. First, in this S-O-R theory, this study is static in nature as a single post is considered and a temporal precedence and longer-term dynamics is not captured. Second, the study is based on a single hypothetical purchase scenario and one used a single utilitarian category post, which overall limits the external validity; other products in other hedonic, identity relevant, or more rich platform usage contexts (e.g., videos, livestreams) this study's audience of various ages, digital engagement, and cultural contexts would respond differently. Third, this model considered stimuli and the source characteristics as message credibility, argument quality, and influencer versus employee, but in practice, social media persuasion is dependent on other attributes such as disclosure, emotional tone, and visual style. Finally, some alternative factor structures remained unexamined, complimenting this study's overall good measurement model fit, especially measurement invariance across the source's unexamined conditions. Future researchers can build on these findings, extending the framework in various ways.

It would be beneficial to have longitudinal and multi-phase experimental designs and ideally tied to some behavioural metric (like click behaviour, redemption of discount codes, purchase simulations, actual purchases, etc.) to empirically test for, and sustain across time,

stronger attempts for causation ordering and persistence. Detailing of the boundary conditions and generalizability would result from sample diversifications across age, digital culture, differing levels of digital literacy, and more, which could be achieved from repeated attempts across varying product ranges, levels of involvement, and formats of platforms. Future designs also should expand to include more varied constructs of messages and sources including style and framing of disclosure, emotional framing and levels of psychological closeness, and their differentiated roles (micro and macro influencers, frontline versus expert employees) in the context of, and to explain the paradox, when and why trust and intention is achieved through authenticity and credibility. Finally, in order to reach an optimal level of construct validity, comparing other potential measurement structures (for instance, other higher order factors of message evaluation) and undertaking measurement invariance tests across social media persuasion groups would be beneficial going forward.

4.4 Overall Conclusion

We studied participants' perception of employee ambassadors' posts versus influencer posts to see how influencer expertise and employee ambassador credibility impact consumer purchase intention and how post message strategies, message credibility, and argument quality impact participants' perception of employee ambassador expertise, trust, attitude, and perceived authenticity, as well as influencer credibility, trust, and attitude. We used the SCT, ELM, TPB, and SOR to structure the overall framework and Relationships of SEM to extract the primary measurement model on message/source features. Data analysis from 312 participants showed brand trust as the highest driver of purchase intention, as it mediated the impact message features had. Although post message features and purchase intention showed minimal direct correlation, correlations influenced brand trust. Overall, participants trust employee posts more and demonstrate overall credibility more efficiently in message and argument quality. Furthermore, influencers and employees exhibit employee ambassadors' privilege in this structure. Theoretically, this helps model the message-source/ communicator framework, and practically helps companies devise credible post strategies. The response from participants shows there's no need to choose one, as using employee ambassadors drives more brand credibility overall.

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Annexes

Annex 1. Questionnaire - Influencer condition

The stimulus post used in this condition is reproduced below (Figure A1). Unless otherwise stated, all items use a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

Participant information

Age: _____ years

Gender: 1 = Male; 2 = Female

Current status: 1 = Working full-time; 2 = Working part-time; 3 = Self-employed; 4 = Homemaker; 5 = Retired; 6 = Full-time student; 7 = Other

Social media use frequency (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, WhatsApp):

1 = Several times a day; 2 = About once a day; 3 = Several times a week; 4 = About once a week; 5 = Less than once a week

Figure A1

Post of influencer

Source: compiled by the author.

Manipulation check (single-item; not aggregated)

1. The person in this post is a professional influencer. (SourceCheck_Influencer)

2. The person in this post is a company employee. (SourceCheck_Employee)

Message credibility

1. The information in this post seems accurate. (Cred1)

2. The information in this post is believable. (Cred2)

3. The information in this post is trustworthy. (Cred3)

4. The information in this post is reliable. (Cred4)

Argument quality

1. This post provides enough information for me to evaluate the product. (Arg1)

2. This post contains detailed information about the product. (Arg2)

3. This post is informative. (Arg3)

4. The arguments in this post are persuasive. (Arg4)

5. The arguments in this post are convincing. (Arg5)

6. This post gives strong reasons to consider this product. (Arg6)

Brand trust

1. I trust this brand to keep its promises. (BT1)

2. This brand is reliable. (BT2)

3. I feel confident in this brand. (BT3)

4. I believe this brand has my best interests at heart. (BT4)

Attitude toward the message (semantic differential; 1–7)

1. My overall evaluation of this post is: Bad (1) — Good (7). (Att1)

2. This post is: Unappealing (1) — Appealing (7). (Att2)

3. This post is: Unfavorable (1) — Favorable (7). (Att3)

4. This post is: Boring (1) — Interesting (7). (Att4)

Perceived authenticity

1. This post seems authentic rather than staged. (Auth1)

2. The person in this post appears sincere. (Auth2)

3. This post feels genuine rather than purely promotional. (Auth3)

4. The person in this post seems honest about their experience with the product. (Auth4)

Purchase intention

1. I would consider buying this product. (PI1)

2. It is likely that I would purchase this product. (PI2)

3. I intend to buy this product in the near future. (PI3)

Scoring and composite-score calculations: see Annex 3.

Annex 2. Questionnaire - Employee-ambassador condition

The stimulus post used in this condition is reproduced below (Figure A2). Unless otherwise stated, all items use a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). The questionnaire content is identical to Annex 1, except for the stimulus post.

Participant information

Age: _____ years

Gender: 1 = Male; 2 = Female

Current status: 1 = Working full-time; 2 = Working part-time; 3 = Self-employed; 4 = Homemaker; 5 = Retired; 6 = Full-time student; 7 = Other

Social media use frequency (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, WhatsApp):

1 = Several times a day; 2 = About once a day; 3 = Several times a week; 4 = About once a week; 5 = Less than once a week.

Figure A2

Post of employee- ambassador

Source: compiled by the author.

Manipulation check (single-item; not aggregated)

3. The person in this post is a professional influencer. (SourceCheck_Influencer)

4. The person in this post is a company employee. (SourceCheck_Employee)

Message credibility

5. The information in this post seems accurate. (Cred1)

6. The information in this post is believable. (Cred2)

7. The information in this post is trustworthy. (Cred3)

8. The information in this post is reliable. (Cred4)

Argument quality

7. This post provides enough information for me to evaluate the product. (Arg1)

8. This post contains detailed information about the product. (Arg2)

9. This post is informative. (Arg3)

10. The arguments in this post are persuasive. (Arg4)

11. The arguments in this post are convincing. (Arg5)

12. This post gives strong reasons to consider this product. (Arg6)

Brand trust

5. I trust this brand to keep its promises. (BT1)

6. This brand is reliable. (BT2)

7. I feel confident in this brand. (BT3)

8. I believe this brand has my best interests at heart. (BT4)

Attitude toward the message (semantic differential; 1–7)

5. My overall evaluation of this post is: Bad (1) — Good (7). (Att1)

6. This post is: Unappealing (1) — Appealing (7). (Att2)

7. This post is: Unfavorable (1) — Favorable (7). (Att3)

8. This post is: Boring (1) — Interesting (7). (Att4)

Perceived authenticity

5. This post seems authentic rather than staged. (Auth1)

6. The person in this post appears sincere. (Auth2)

7. This post feels genuine rather than purely promotional. (Auth3)

8. The person in this post seems honest about their experience with the product. (Auth4)

Purchase intention

4. I would consider buying this product. (PI1)

5. It is likely that I would purchase this product. (PI2)

6. I intend to buy this product in the near future. (PI3)

Scoring and composite-score calculations: see Annex 3.

Annex 3. Original calculations for composite variables

All questionnaire items were coded so that higher values indicate more positive evaluations. Likert-type statements were coded from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Semantic-differential items were coded from 1 (negative pole) to 7 (positive pole). No items were reverse-coded. Composite scores were computed as arithmetic means of their respective items. Because the survey was administered with forced-response settings, no item-level missingness was expected.

Composite-score calculations (applied identically in both conditions):
MC = mean(Cred1, Cred2, Cred3, Cred4)
AQ = mean(Arg1, Arg2, Arg3, Arg4, Arg5, Arg6)
BT = mean(BT1, BT2, BT3, BT4)
ATM = mean(Att1, Att2, Att3, Att4)
PA = mean(Auth1, Auth2, Auth3, Auth4)
PI = mean(PI1, PI2, PI3)

Manipulation-check items (single-item; not aggregated):
SourceCheck_Influencer and SourceCheck_Employee were treated as separate items and were not combined into a composite.

One-line example calculation:
If Cred1 = 6, Cred2 = 5, Cred3 = 6, and Cred4 = 7, then MC = (6 + 5 + 6 + 7) / 4 = 6.00.