

# Factors affecting perceived sustainability of green-influencers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to identify the green influencers characteristics (authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness) on followers' trust and their subsequent intentions to engage in sustainable practices through using Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model in the context of China.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were collected from 366 Generation Z respondents in China who frequently engage with green influencers through a questionnaire App, and the research hypotheses were tested using

**Findings** – The results show that green influencers characteristics (authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness) have positive impact on trust and their followers purchase intention and brand attitude.

**Originality/value** – There is little theoretical or empirical understanding of how the unique characteristics of green influencers shape consumer trust and pro-sustainability intentions, especially among Generation Z consumers in collectivist contexts such as China.

**Keywords** Green influencer, Gen Z, Sustainability

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Influencer marketing has experienced rapid global expansion, with the industry tripling in size since 2019 and reaching a market value of approximately US\$21.1bn by 2023, with China represents about 75% of the global market value of influencer advertising revenue. Influencer marketing is an essential element of several digital marketing strategies, since it effectively engages customers who ignore conventional digital advertisements like as banners and promotional adverts, leading to heightened attention from both practitioners and academics (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b).

In a parallel but seemingly unrelated stream of research, there has been a growing interest in environmental issues from policy makers, businesses, consumers and academics alike. This situation invites an examination of the interplay between influencer marketing and responsible environmental behaviour. Indeed, social media has developed into a platform for advocating change, promoting sustainability and sharing knowledge regarding environmental issues (Hu *et al.*, 2023). Green influencers refer to people who advocate for and promote environmental sustainability, raise awareness about environmental issues and endorse environmentally friendly items (Boerman *et al.*, 2022). They strive to guide and educate their followers in adopting sustainable lives. Their material primarily focuses on promoting environmentally friendly food choices, sustainable tourism and eco-conscious beauty products (König and Maier, 2024). They are able to guide consumers who are confused or inspire them to embrace a sustainable lifestyle. As digital communication blossoms, green influencers will likely be more effective in advocating for sustainable consumption or lifestyle choices around the world (Yildirim, 2021).

While prior studies have extensively examined the characteristics of traditional (non-green) influencers across industries such as fashion and beauty, green influencers operate in a

Received 23 June 2025  
Revised 21 October 2025  
28 November 2025  
Accepted 1 February 2026

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fundamentally different context that demands separate scholarly attention. Prior research has mostly focused on their commercial influence (König and Maier, 2024) exploring how endorsements shape attitudes and purchase intentions but rarely examined how moral and environmental motives alter these dynamics. In commercial domains, traits like attractiveness, authenticity and expertise have been shown to positively influence consumer attitudes and behaviours, particularly when there is congruence between the influencer's image and the endorsed product Schouten *et al.* (2020). And while we know that authenticity and expertise build trust in traditional influencers, we do not know whether these attributes operate differently when sustainability is the central theme.

Indeed, in the context of sustainability communication, green influencers are subject to more stringent expectations. Their credibility is not only evaluated on visual appeal or brand fit but also on their ethical alignment, environmental transparency and lifestyle consistency (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b). The risk of perceived hypocrisy is significantly higher, as promoting eco-friendly products while exhibiting unsustainable behaviour may lead to accusations of "greenwashing" and erode consumer trust. This moral scrutiny amplifies the need for influencers to demonstrate genuine commitment, particularly through their perceived expertise (Casaló *et al.*, 2020). Taken together, these differences suggest that the influence mechanisms in green marketing may not mirror those observed in traditional influencer contexts and further study is necessary.

A further deficiency in existing studies is evident, Generation Z is frequently characterised as a generation of digital natives, whose lives are highly influenced by social media. Members of Generation Z use social media for entertainment, shopping, consuming news content, as well as connecting and interacting with brands, organisations and other individuals. In addition, this generation is characterised by a pronounced environmental consciousness and is concerned about issues such as sustainability and global warming. A large portion of Gen Z is aware of global climate challenge and desires to engage in efforts to save the planet. This generation is a significant portion of the green influencer audience. Younger individuals generally exhibit diminished faith in political institutions, prompting them to seek information on environmental concerns from online resources, particularly through green influencers.

To address the abovementioned gaps in the literature, we intend to comprehensively examine how the characteristics and traits of green influencers impact their followers' perceptions of sustainable practices. Specifically, this study explores the extent to which traits including authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness influence followers' attitudes toward and engagement with environmental sustainability initiatives promoted by these influencers. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of green influencers in shaping sustainable behaviours and attitudes among their audiences. Based on these, two research objectives are proposed:

1. to test how influencer characteristics impact trust; and
2. to test how trust affects consumer sustainable practice intention.

## Literature review

### *Influencer marketing*

Influencer marketing has evolved into a powerful strategy across multiple industries, enabling marketers to engage with targeted audiences. It involves enterprises collaborating with influencers to promote products or services in ways that enhance brand awareness and performance (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Influencers cultivate personal brands and build trust-based relationships with followers to educate, entertain and influence behaviour (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). The emergence of user-generated content has further enabled ordinary users to become impactful creators (Masuda, Han and Lee, 2022). Initially focused on

certain sectors such as beauty, influencer marketing has undergone substantial expansion. Beauty influencers – also known as beauty vloggers – focus on cosmetics reviews and tutorials, dominating early influencer research (Garg and Bakshi, 2024). As social media diversified, so did influencer types. Fitness influencers emerged to promote health, exercise and nutrition, aligning with public interest in wellness (Duplaga, 2020). Meanwhile, mukbang influencers gained popularity in East Asia through eating broadcasts that combine entertainment with cultural fascination (Kang *et al.*, 2020). More recently, green or eco-friendly influencers have entered the landscape, advocating for sustainable products and lifestyles. These individuals promote environmental consciousness and attract audiences who are progressively focused on ethical consumption and climate responsibility (Kılıç and Gürlek, 2023). The emergence of green influencers signifies not only variety but also a transformation in consumer values, highlighting the strategic significance of sustainability in contemporary influencer marketing.

### *Green influencers*

The goal of green influencers is to educate and guide people on adopting a sustainable way of living (Pittman and Abell, 2021a, 2021b). Their primary areas of interest typically include promoting ecologically friendly eating habits, advocating for sustainable travel practices and supporting the use of environmentally conscious cosmetics. Essentially, these influencers endorse environmentally friendly products and behaviours to reduce waste and pollution (Yildirim, 2021). Green influencers advocate for environmentally friendly consumption options offered by brands. For instance, Cherrie Tu, with around 400,000 followers, has endorsed Alpro's plant-based products, including vegan milk. Green influencers are frequently described to be "sustainability superheroes" or praised as a powerful "secret weapon for sustainability" due to their capacity to engage extensive audiences. For example, Kathryn Kellogg, with 566,000 followers on @going.zero.waste, is one such influencer. They lead their followers in embracing sustainable consumption practices, with a particular emphasis on sustainable fashion, eco-friendly food choices, sustainable travel, adopting a sustainable lifestyle, making conscious decisions, using environmentally friendly cosmetics and the pursuit of a zero-waste lifestyle (Yildirim, 2021). Green influencers play a crucial role in influencing consumers' willingness to adopt environmentally friendly consumption behaviours (Pittman and Abell, 2021a, 2021b), embrace greener lifestyles (Chwialkowska, 2019) and actively participate in environmental activism (Knupfer *et al.*, 2023).

### **Theoretical framework**

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework is a psychological model that examines the influence of environmental stimuli on individuals' emotional states and subsequent behaviours (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This framework has been extensively used in various fields, including psychology, marketing and environmental psychology, to understand and predict behavioural responses. The concept posits that stimuli perceived from the environment may trigger an individual's internal evaluative state, resulting in either positive or negative behaviours in reaction to those stimuli (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974).

The SOR model is extensively used in behavioural and consumer research to clarify how individuals process external stimuli and translate them into behavioural outcomes. This discussion highlights the fundamental elements of the SOR framework – stimulus, organism and response – and illustrates their application in academic research. In this model, stimuli refer to external or environmental cues that affect an individual's psychological or perceptual state. These inputs particularly in physical or digital environments, initiate emotional and cognitive responses that shape perception and behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The organism component captures this internal processing, encompassing

attitudes, beliefs, motivations and emotional states that mediate the impact of stimuli. Upon exposure to stimuli, individuals interpret and evaluate the information using their cognitive and emotional capacities. The internal reactions subsequently influence the response, which mirrors behavioural intentions shaped by the organismic state. Response tendencies may include approach or avoidance behaviours and are determined by how individuals emotionally and cognitively interpret the stimuli. Ultimately, responses may manifest as either positive or negative behavioural outcomes, depending on the subjective assessment of the external environment (Jacoby, 2002).

This study uses the SOR framework, as it provides a systematic approach for analysing consumer psychological mechanisms, aligning with the study's objectives. Widely adopted in consumer behaviour and marketing studies, the SOR model has also been applied in the context of influencer marketing. For instance, research has shown that influencer characteristics, including attractiveness and trustworthiness could shape consumers' internal evaluations and lead to behavioural outcomes. Specifically, one study demonstrated that Instagram influencers' marketing efforts significantly affected followers' perceptions of their trustworthiness, subsequently leading to impulsive purchase behaviour, highlighting the mediating role of organismic states in consumer decision-making (Koay *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, livestream influencer marketing has been shown to affect offline consumer actions through the same SOR pathway. Researchers identified marketing stimuli, including source attractiveness, informativeness, virtual enjoyment and subjective norms, researchers found that these factors shaped consumers' cognitive and emotional responses, ultimately impacting their offline purchase intentions (Zhang *et al.*, 2021).

## Influencer characteristics as "S"

### *Influencer authenticity*

Influencer authenticity has emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping consumer trust, engagement and brand-related outcomes in influencer marketing. Social media influencer authenticity is defined as the alignment between a brand's offerings and the expectations of consumers who engage with promoted products (Ebben and Bull, 2023). Authentic influencers are primarily motivated by self-expression and delivering genuine value, rather than financial incentives or audience appeasement. They view content creation as a way to share meaningful insights or experiences, rather than simply endorsing products. Giambastiani *et al.* (2025) found that collaborating with inauthentic green influencers can backfire, further emphasising the pivotal value of authenticity in fostering positive brand and consumer outcomes. A significant correlation exists between perceived influencer authenticity and emotional connections with followers, which in turn enhances brand trust and loyalty (Jun and Yi, 2020). The authenticity of influencers positively affects perceptions of brand authenticity and brand attitude (Lindmoser *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, when influencers are perceived as authentic, it increases follower trust and engagement, ultimately improving consumers' willingness to pay (Kapitan *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1.* Green influencer authenticity positively affects trust.

### *Influencer expertise*

Expertise refers to the level of recognised comprehension, skills and knowledge possessed by the endorser (Masuda, Han, and Lee, 2022). Sources regarded as highly credible are more likely to be trusted because of their perceived expertise (Hovland and Weuiss, 1951). This competence acts as a form of qualification that enhances the endorser's ability to persuade consumers. The endorser's perceived competence can significantly influence consumers' confidence and their intention to purchase the promoted product. In the context

of influencer marketing, an influencer's expertise is judged by followers based on their perceived skill, proficiency and subject-matter knowledge. Influencer expertise significantly influences perceived trustworthiness and directly impacts consumer purchasing decisions and intentions. Moreover, a higher level of expertise among influencers correlates with increased trust from followers (Kim and Kim, 2021). In a study conducted by Lou and Yuan (2019), it was discovered that the expertise of influencers has a positive impact on the trust that followers have in their branded content. According to AlFarraj *et al.* (2021), their research indicates that expertise does not have a significant impact on purchase intention in the aesthetic dermatology market. This is because the industry is still lacking in experience and maturity, which limits its ability to influence consumer behaviour. Besides that, expertise will have a significant influence on online customer engagement. When influencers demonstrate significant expertise, they provide valuable, accurate and relevant information that resonates with their audience's interests. This paper posits that a positive relationship between expertise and trust is likely to exist among green influencers, despite the lack of empirical testing in this area. Therefore:

*H2.* Green influencer expertise positively affects trust.

### ***Similarity***

Similarity is defined as a shared attribute between a sender and a receiver. Individuals who share similarities generally exhibit a high level of interpersonal attraction, trust and understanding compared to those who are perceived as dissimilar. According to interpersonal attraction theory, similarity serves as a primary catalyst for attraction, as people are inclined to form connections with others who reinforce a sense of harmony in self-identity and contribute to self-esteem enhancement. Consequently, tend to gravitate toward others or groups that reflect similar attributes to their own. Customers' perception of an influencer as similar to themselves, this resemblance satisfies their need for self-continuity, consequently increasing the influencer's attractiveness (Hsieh *et al.*, 2023). Participants in recent studies have reported perceiving a greater degree of similarity to influencers than to celebrities, which fosters a stronger sense of affinity and emotional connection (Schouten *et al.*, 2021). This perceived similarity not only strengthens engagement and trust but also amplifies the effectiveness of endorsements. Moreover, perceived similarity significantly influences consumers' attitudes toward brands, as individuals tend to notice shared characteristics with their preferred influencers. This perception frequently results in consumers believing that they require the same products used by influencers because of the shared commonality. The following hypothesis is proposed:

*H3.* Green influencer similarity positively affects trust.

### ***Attractiveness***

Attractiveness is commonly linked to positive traits beyond physical appearance, encompassing aspects including personality and athletic ability, which together contribute to a general stereotype of favourable associations toward an individual. This perceived attractiveness plays a pivotal role in enhancing the effectiveness of message dissemination, especially in contexts involving influencers are used to communicate persuasive or insightful messages. Attractiveness significantly influences consumer engagement, as shown by studies highlighting its impact on enhancing audience interaction and receptiveness (AlFarraj *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between the attractiveness of social media influencers and consumers' perception of the endorsed brand image, with appealing influencers positively shaping how the brand is viewed (Mohamad *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, this article proposes the following:

H4. Green influencer attractiveness positively affects their trust.

### ***Trust as “O”***

Trust encompasses various interpretations. Trust is defined as a willingness to accept vulnerability based on the expectation that another party will act in ways important to the trustor, even in the absence of monitoring or control. Similarly, trust is established when an individual is perceived as honest, refrains from opportunistic behaviour, and demonstrates effort and reliability – making others believe they can depend on them. Trust significantly impacts consumer behaviour in influencer marketing. Reliable influencers demonstrate a greater persuasive impact, which enhances the probability that their followers will respond to their recommendations. Consumer willingness to purchase significantly increases when the endorser is trusted.

### **Consumer responses as “R”**

#### ***Purchase intentions***

Purchase intention denotes a consumer’s expected selection of a particular company during the decision-making process for a purchase. This is considered a dependable indicator of actual purchasing behaviour. Acquisition intention indicates an individual’s intentional commitment to acquire a specific brand. Previous research consistently indicates that trust is a critical factor influencing purchase intention. Research indicates that trust positively affects consumers’ purchasing intentions (Kim and Kim, 2021). The trust placed in influencers significantly influences consumer purchase intentions (Chen and Yang, 2023). Furthermore, image satisfaction and advertising trust have been demonstrated to positively influence purchase intention. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. Green influencer trust positively affects followers’ purchase intention.

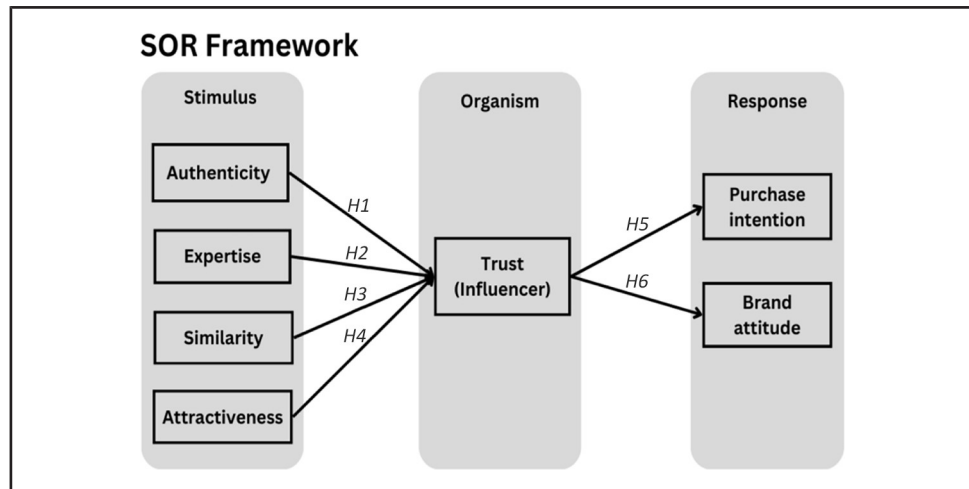
#### ***Brand attitude***

The perception of a brand as positive or negative is termed brand attitude. A more precise definition it as the consumer’s evaluation of a brand’s capacity to fulfil a particular and relevant purchase motive. This viewpoint indicates that consumers may form different attitudes toward a brand depending on the primary reason behind their purchase on a particular occasion. Research has consistently demonstrated the impact of various factors on brand attitude. Empirical research identifies various factors influencing brand attitude. Brand satisfaction has been demonstrated to positively influence consumers’ overall perception of a brand Hwang *et al.* (2021). Perceived brand knowledge, which includes brand awareness and brand image, positively influences both the cognitive and affective aspects of brand attitude. Moreover, brand attitude serves as a mediator between celebrity endorsement and purchase intention, suggesting that effective endorsements improve brand assessments and hence reinforce customers’ purchasing intentions. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. Green influencer trust positively affects brand attitude on social media.

This study identified four influencer characteristics – authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness as stimuli; trust as an organism; as well as the response, including purchase intention and brand attitude. According to this, this paper establishes six hypotheses. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1** Conceptual framework



## Methodology

An online survey was selected as the specific method for data collection. An online survey is a data collection approach where respondents complete a questionnaire through the internet (Sue and Ritter, 2007), enabling the acquisition of broad and varied data regarding the impact of influencer marketing on Gen Z consumers on social media. Scales to measure the study variables were adapted from existing literature. A seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 representing strongly disagree and 7 representing strongly agree was used. The three items to measure influencer authenticity were adopted from Jun and Yi (2020). Expertise was assessed using three items derived from. The three metrics for assessing similarity were adopted from Munnukka *et al.* (2016). Attractiveness was measured using four items taken from Munnukka *et al.* (2016). Three items to measure trust were borrowed from purchase intention was measured using four items taken from Torres *et al.* (2019) and Nurhandayani *et al.* (2019). Brand attitude was measured using three items adapted from Torres *et al.* (2019).

## Sampling

Generation Z was brought up in a digital environment characterised by the internet and social media. They frequently use their phones and are perceived as a progressive generation (Gomes *et al.*, 2023). This study uses a nonprobability sampling technique, specifically utilising purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a method of selecting research subjects in a non-random manner, when the researcher carefully picks units to be observed based on their potential to provide representative or instructive data (Babbie, 2020). Eligibility criteria included:

- individuals aged 18 or older belonging to Gen Z;
- individuals who followed influencers on social media;
- having followed at least one green/sustainability-focused social media influencer; and
- people who are Chinese.

These questions are asked at the beginning of the questionnaire as screen questions. Recruitment was conducted via, sustainability-related online communities and social media platforms (WeChat, Xiaohongshu/ and Douyin/TikTok). The survey link directed respondents to an online screening questionnaire and an informed consent page; eligible respondents

proceeded to the main questionnaire. A small monetary incentive (or raffle) was offered to increase response rates. Data quality checks (attention checks, minimum completion time and response consistency) were applied; cases failing these checks were removed from analysis. The final sample comprised  $N=366$  valid responses.

The sample size for this study was selected to ensure sufficient statistical correctness and reliability, adhering to established criteria in social science research. Hair (2019) recommend a minimum of 200 completed replies to ensure trustworthy and accessible results. Adhering to this limit was crucial for enhancing the precision of parameter estimates and reinforcing the validity of the findings. The study aims to surpass this threshold and improve the precision of parameter estimations and the validity of the findings by collecting a bigger sample size, thereby establishing a robust foundation for subsequent data processing and interpretation.

### *Data collection*

The data collection used a quantitative survey APP, Wenjuanxing (WJX) which is a very popular online questionnaire system in China (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Surveys can be easily distributed via links or QR codes, facilitating broad dissemination across multiple platforms. Conducting a pilot test is a crucial step in the questionnaire refinement process, especially when translation is involved (Presser *et al.*, 2004). The pilot test was conducted with 20 qualified respondents. Feedback indicated that the expression in the translated language required greater precision, and some respondents suggested that the format needed improvement.

### **Results**

Our study included 182 females (49.7%), with 95.1% of participants having completed high-school or higher degrees. In terms of social media usage, the sample indicated high levels of engagement: 8.2% used social media for less than 1 h daily, 18.0% for 2–3 h, 32.8% for 4–5 h and 41.0% for over 6 h.

Since we collected data using a single, self-reported questionnaire the potential of common method bias could not be ruled out. We minimised such bias procedurally Model fit and tested it via a statistical approach as well. In data collection, we ensured all respondents were aware that their results were protected by anonymity, while we also counterbalanced question and item order. Statistically, we conducted Harman's single factor tests, which yielded a 34.3% of total variance, well below the 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias is not a concern in this study.

### *Model fit*

To test the reliability of the scales used, reliability analysis was conducted. The Cronbach's alpha values of the variables were all high, including authenticity (Cronbach's alpha=0.929), expertise (Cronbach's alpha=0.912), similarity (Cronbach's alpha=0.911), attractiveness (Cronbach's alpha=0.933), trust (Cronbach's alpha=0.929), purchase intention (Cronbach's alpha=0.921) and brand attitude (Cronbach's alpha=0.909).

Next, to check their validity, CFA was performed using AMOS. Model fit shows a good fit, CMIN=255.401, DF=231,  $P=0.13$ , CMIN/DF=1.106, RMSEA=0.017, GFI=0.946, AGFI=0.93, IFI=0.997, TLI=0.996, CFI=0.996. To ensure construct validity and reliability in quantitative research, it is essential that the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds 0.5 and the composite reliability (CR) is above 0.7 (Sürücü and Maslakci, 2020). Each variable has high efficiency, because the AVE value range of the variable is 0.747–0.814, all greater than 0.5, and the CR value range is 0.909–0.933, all greater than 0.7 (Sürücü and Maslakci, 2020).

### Hypothesis testing

For *H1*, which posited that authenticity and trust, are supported with a significant moderate correlation ( $r = 0.375, p < 0.05$ ). *H2* proposed expertise and trust, which is supported by a positive weak correlation ( $r = 0.215, p < 0.05$ ). *H3*, similarity and trust in the analysis showed a positive moderate correlation ( $r = 0.347, p < 0.05$ ). For *H4*, to test the relationship between attractiveness and trust the result showed a positive weak correlation ( $r = 0.217, p < 0.05$ ). Moving beyond *H5*, indicating the relationship between trust and purchase intention. Results show a positive weak correlation ( $r = 0.223, p < 0.05$ ). Finally, *H6* shows that trust and brand attitude, which is supported positive moderate correlation ( $r = 0.356, p < 0.05$ ).

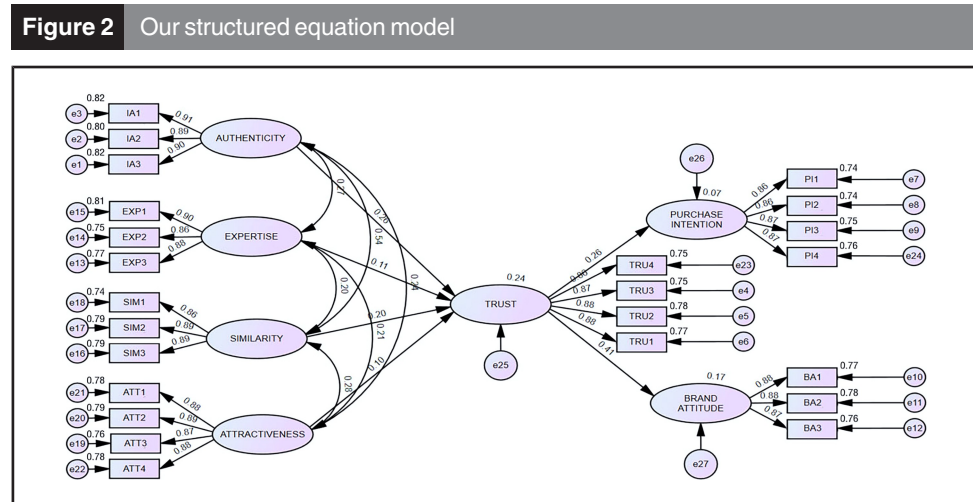
Next, SPSS was used to conduct regression analysis. The results are shown in [Table 1](#) (Results of regression).

For *H1*, the relationship between authenticity and trust is positive ( $t = 7.71, p < 0.01$ ); therefore, *H1* is supported. For *H2*, the relationship between expertise and trust is positive and significant ( $t = 4.1927, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, *H2* is supported. For *H3*, the relationship between similarity and trust is positive and significant ( $t = 7.0605, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, *H3* is supported. For *H4*, the relationship between attractiveness and trust is positive and significant ( $t = 4.2422, p < 0.001$ ). Hence, *H4* is supported. For *H5*, the relationship between trust and purchase intention is positive and significant ( $t = 4.3684, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, *H5* is supported. Finally, for *H6*, the relationship between trust and brand attitude is positive and significant ( $t = 7.2663, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, *H6* is supported.

### Structural model assessment

The proposed structural equation model ([Figure 2](#)) was tested using AMOS 28. The model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data. All latent constructs were measured

No.	Research hypotheses	Estimate $\beta$	t-value	P	Supported?
<i>H1</i>	Authenticity $\rightarrow$ trust	0.3220	7.7130	<0.001	Yes
<i>H2</i>	Expertise $\rightarrow$ trust	0.2029	4.1927	<0.001	Yes
<i>H3</i>	Similarity $\rightarrow$ trust	0.3318	7.0605	<0.001	Yes
<i>H4</i>	Attractiveness $\rightarrow$ trust	0.2099	4.2422	<0.001	Yes
<i>H5</i>	Trust $\rightarrow$ purchase intention	0.2103	4.3684	<0.001	Yes
<i>H6</i>	Trust $\rightarrow$ brand attitude	0.3765	7.2663	<0.001	Yes



using multiple indicators with high factor loadings ( $\lambda > 0.70$ ), indicating adequate convergent validity.

### Hypothesis testing

The standardised regression results are presented in Table 2. Among the four antecedents of trust, authenticity ( $\beta = 0.256, p < 0.001$ ), expertise ( $\beta = 0.114, p = 0.034$ ) and similarity ( $\beta = 0.203, p = 0.001$ ) were found to have significant positive effects on trust in the influencer, thus supporting *H1*, *H2* and *H3*. However, Attractiveness did not significantly predict trust ( $\beta = 0.10, p = 0.063$ ), and thus *H4* was not supported. Furthermore, trust significantly influenced both purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.263, p < 0.001$ ) and brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.407, p < 0.001$ ), confirming *H5* and *H6*.

### Mediation analysis

To further explore the mediating role of trust, a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples was conducted using the bias-corrected confidence interval method. The results (Table 3) revealed several significant indirect effects.

The indirect effects of authenticity, expertise and similarity on purchase intention and brand attitude via trust were significant. For example, the path authenticity → trust → brand attitude showed a significant standardised indirect effect ( $\beta = -0.104, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.182, -0.043], p < 0.001$ ), while expertise → trust → purchase intention also yielded a significant indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.030, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.006, 0.069], p = 0.012$ ).

In contrast, the indirect effects of attractiveness on purchase intention and brand attitude via Trust were not significant, as their 95% confidence intervals included zero (e.g.  $\beta = 0.026, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.002, 0.063], p = 0.066$ ).

### Discussion and implications

The purpose of this article is to comprehensively investigate how the characteristics and traits of green influencers impact their followers' perceptions of sustainable practices. This study aims to

**Table 2** Structural path estimates and significance testing

Path	$\beta$	S.E.	C.R.	p
Authenticity → trust	0.256	0.052	4.018	***
Expertise → trust	0.114	0.050	2.124	0.034
Similarity → trust	0.203	0.056	3.208	0.001
Attractiveness → trust	0.100	0.051	1.859	0.063
Trust → purchase intention	0.263	0.055	4.713	***
Trust → brand attitude	0.407	0.060	7.377	***

Note(s): \*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table 3** Bootstrap mediation test results for the indirect effects via trust

Pathway	Indirect effect	95% CI (BC)	p	Mediation
Authenticity → trust → purchase intention	-0.054 / 0.067	[-0.106, -0.021]	0.001	✓
Authenticity → trust → brand attitude	0.092 / -0.104	[-0.182, -0.043]	0.001	✓
Expertise → trust → purchase intention	0.028 / 0.030	[0.005, 0.063]	0.012	✓
Expertise → trust → brand attitude	0.047 / 0.046	[0.008, 0.100]	0.017	✓
Similarity → trust → purchase intention	0.047 / 0.054	[0.019, 0.103]	0.002	✓
Similarity → trust → brand attitude	0.079 / 0.083	[0.029, 0.155]	0.002	✓
Attractiveness → trust → purchase intention	0.025 / 0.026	[-0.004, 0.063]	0.066	×
Attractiveness → trust → brand attitude	0.042 / 0.041	[-0.005, 0.093]	0.086	×

provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of green influencers in shaping sustainable behaviours and attitudes among their audiences. To achieve this, the research tests how influencer characteristics influence trust and how this trust influences consumer sustainable practice intentions.

To test how influencer characteristics influence trust, we confirm four important characteristics of green influencers, namely authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness having a positive impact on consumers' trust. To test how trust influences consumers' sustainable practice intentions, we confirm hypotheses that trust influences consumer sustainable purchase intentions and brand attitudes. Through the validation of these six hypotheses, this study comprehensively reveals how the characteristics of green influencers influence followers' trust and further explores the role of trust in driving consumer sustainable practice intentions, including purchase intention and brand attitude.

The results indicate that the four proposed characteristics – authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness have a significant and positive impact on followers' trust in green influencers. This supports previous findings indicating that influencer authenticity promotes perceptions of honesty and sincerity (Kim and Kim, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2022), whereas expertise increases perceived credibility and persuasiveness (AlFarraj *et al.*, 2021). Perceived similarity enhances relational closeness and trust (Lou and Yuan, 2019), while attractiveness persists in affecting initial judgements and credibility (Audia *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, trust is a significant predictor of sustainable purchase intention and brand attitude. This corroborates previous studies indicating that trust in influencers increases consumers' propensity to buy endorsed products (Kim and Kim, 2021; Lou and Yuan, 2019) and enhances their assessment of related brands (Nafees *et al.*, 2021; Hmoud *et al.*, 2022).

A more nuanced, but also interesting discussion can take place regarding the un hypothesized mediating role of trust. While all dimensions in the Stimulus column of our model were positively related to Trust, and trust was also positively related to the two dimensions of our Response column, we wanted to further check for the direct relationship of perceived authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness to brand attitudes and purchase intentions. The results suggest that while Trust mediated the relationship between authenticity, expertise and similarity to brand outcomes, this was not the case for attractiveness. While attractiveness positively affected trust, and trust positively affected brand attitudes and purchase intentions, the fact that the mediation between the two is weak is noteworthy. This finding suggests that while physical or social attractiveness can generate an initial sense of attention and liking (consistent with source credibility theory), it may not be sufficient to sustain deeper outcomes without also a foundation of perceived authenticity, expertise or similarity. In other words, when an influencer is trusted for their informational attributes such as expertise, they are more likely to generate positive brand outcomes via trust; however, attractiveness alone does not lead to this.

## Contribution

The present paper contributes to the existing literature in numerous ways. From an academic perspective, current research has not sufficiently explored the characteristics of green influencers, especially within the context of younger (Gen Z) Chinese consumers. Arguably in a collectivist culture such as China, social influence and conformity play a stronger role in developing online trust. Moreover, the social media ecosystem is quite unique. China's government often and actively promotes green lifestyles through platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, which leads to a context where sustainability is not just socially desirable but morally endorsed, adding a novel cultural layer to our understanding of trust formation between influencers.

Secondly, we not only draw from but extend Source Credibility Theory by contextualising influencer credibility within the moral and environmental domain. While previous studies have largely examined how expertise, attractiveness, similarity affect brand outcomes, our findings show that in sustainability related communication, authenticity and expertise play a

much bigger role than attractiveness. By integrating these constructs within the SOR framework, we further demonstrate how influencers traits (stimuli) affect shape psychological evaluations (trust as the organism) and, behaviour intentions (responses).

This study also suggests practical implications. The study offers valuable insights for marketers and brand managers looking to leverage green influencers in their campaigns. Since the influencer marketing is growing, it is crucial for marketers selecting appropriate influencers to endorse the product or the service and the brand. To use relational trust, this study offers sophisticated standards for evaluating a green influencer's characteristics, including authenticity, expertise, similarity and attractiveness. This information might aid companies in designing potentially more effective influencer marketing efforts, rather than relying merely on data that details the number of followers and engagement metrics of influencers. For instance, companies operating in the FMCG industry focusing on natural and organic personal care products can collaborate with green influencers to promote their eco-friendly products and amplify their sustainability messages. Further, the green influencers could target those non green audiences, to attract those consumers who lack the motivations to consume sustainably, green influencers may include additional non green subjects in their messages. Additionally, because Gen-Z consumers prioritise ecologically friendly items and are becoming more concerned with ethical consumption, it is vital to consider the "green" aspect of consumption as well. Therefore, it is essential for brands to cooperate with green influencers. Taking this action will enhance the company's reputation and give it an effective increase.

### Limitations and future studies

This study offers important insights regarding the role of green influencers; however, it presents several limitations. One significant limitation is that the influence of green influencers may produce varying outcomes across different contexts. Future research should explore the broader applicability of the identified characteristics by examining their relevance across various categories of influencers, including travel and lifestyle influencers. This study is limited to China. China is a developing country in Asia, exhibiting variations from other nations attributable to distinct cultural and historical contexts. Future research may examine how green influencers impact consumers in other countries or among different populations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these changes. Moreover, our study found four essential qualities in green influencers, it is possible that other crucial qualities were undetected. Future research should use qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews to identify additional factors that may influence followers' perceptions of sustainability. Besides that, purchasing intention and brand attitude were the two variables that this study concentrated on about intentions for sustainable practices. Future research may investigate additional significant factors, such as word of mouth and repurchase intention, to furnish a comprehensive understanding of consumer conduct in reaction to green influencers. Finally, this research used a survey method, which allowed for the examination of correlations but not causality. Future studies may use experimental methodologies to determine causal relationships between influencer characteristics and consumer behaviours. Addressing these limitations will enable future research to expand upon the findings of this study, thereby enhancing the understanding of green influencers' impact on sustainable practices.

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