



Loyalty to influencers and brands: Does negative publicity matter?

Andriansyah Bari¹, Welan Mauli Angguna², Astika Ulfah Izzati³, Frianka Anindea⁴

Department of Business Administration, Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4}

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Abstract

This study examines the critical role of trust in influencer marketing, focusing on how influencers' expertise, authenticity, and homophily affect followers' trust and subsequently their loyalty to influencers and brands. Utilizing an explanatory quantitative cross-sectional non-experimental design, data were collected from 202 consumers who purchased products such as cosmetics, skincare, and gadgets after watching influencer reviews. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results indicate that authenticity, expertise, and homophily significantly contribute to building trust among followers, with authenticity being the most influential factor. Meanwhile, physical attractiveness does not significantly impact trust. Furthermore, trust serves as a crucial mediator, enhancing the effects of influencers' expertise, authenticity, and homophily on both influencer and brand loyalty. Interestingly, negative publicity does not significantly moderate the relationship between trust and loyalty, suggesting that cultural and emotional factors in the Indonesian context may mitigate its impact.

Keywords: Attractiveness; credibility; influencer; trust; negative publicity

Introduction

In the contemporary era, the reception of information and news by individuals is significantly influenced by social media. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center indicates that a majority of individuals rely on social media for news (Halawani et al., 2019). Furthermore, social media serves as a crucial tool for consumers, with Pedersen et al. (2014) highlighting its role in shaping the reputation of companies and brands, thereby influencing consumer choices. The utility of social media as a communication medium offers positive benefits for industries such as hospitality, tourism, fashion, and finance (Halawani et al., 2019; Yasa et al., 2021). This aligns with research by Vithayathil et al. (2020), which found that customers prefer social media as a source for product information. Consequently, companies worldwide recognize the importance of utilizing platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to provide valuable information to customers (Weismueller et al., 2020).

Brands use social media to build customer relationships by enhancing customer trust and engagement, which helps in identifying their business (Hamzah et al., 2021). Previous studies on brand trust, loyalty, equity, relationship, knowledge, love, and purchasing behavior demonstrate a positive impact on customers engaged in social media marketing activities (Hafez, 2021; Hamzah et al., 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2021). Social media is beneficial not only for large corporations but also for small and medium-sized enterprises (Fraccastoro et al., 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2020).

Currently, brands often collaborate with social media influencers (SMIs) to leverage electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Poturak & Turkyilmaz, 2018). Brands utilize SMIs as a marketing communication tool to engage with prospects and customers (Leong et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021). SMIs are considered

¹ E-mail: andriansyah@polsri.ac.id

² E-mail: welan.mauli.angguna@polsri.ac.id

³ E-mail: astika.ulfah.izzati@polsri.ac.id

⁴ E-mail: frianka.anindea@polsri.ac.id

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credible sources of information on specific topics, making their eWOM more trustworthy to customers than marketer-generated messages due to their authenticity and originality (Kim & Kim, 2021). Customers are more likely to trust and purchase from a brand endorsed by an influencer (Nam & Dân, 2018). Balaban & Racz (2020) found that advertisements on influencers' social media accounts are more impactful than those on the brand's own accounts. Zhou et al. (2021) identified that increasing brand awareness, fostering innovation, building strong relationships, maintaining emotional intimacy, and optimizing campaign reach are key benefits of using SMIs.

Marketing through influencers focuses on using individual figures to communicate the brand's message to its target audience (Lim et al., 2017). An influencer's reputation on social media is defined by their communication skills, influence, authenticity, expertise, and attractiveness (Ryu et al., 2021). SMIs act as independent third parties, shaping follower attitudes through various social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011). Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs have less parasocial distance and greater closeness with their followers due to their relatability (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2021). Followers perceive influencer-endorsed content as more trustworthy than similar content from traditional celebrities (Jin et al., 2019). Utilizing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok, paid advertisements from influencers generally receive positive reception from followers (Lou, 2022).

Influencer marketing involves layered relationships among influencers, customers, and brands, with influencers leveraging their established trust to convey brand messages (Kim & Kim, 2021). Research by Nafees et al. (2021) demonstrated a positive relationship between SMIs and customer behavior, mediated by influencer experience and trust. The informative value of content, trust, attractiveness, credibility, and homophily significantly affect follower trust in brand-sponsored content, which in turn impacts brand awareness and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Expertise (Weismueller et al., 2020), authenticity (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2022), attractiveness, and homophily (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019) are critical dimensions for influencer trustworthiness.

However, expertise and authenticity may not significantly influence the relationship between influencers and young followers in India (Bhattacharya, 2022), though other findings suggest expertise is a positive factor (Lin et al., 2021). Physical attractiveness has a positive impact on influencer-follower relationships according to Sakib et al. (2020), but Sokolova & Kefi (2020) found it less significant. They noted that homophily significantly fosters relationships between influencers and followers, contrary to Sakib et al. (2020) who found it less impactful for health-related followers.

Most prior research has focused on preferences, attitudes towards brands, and purchase intentions (Bhattacharya, 2022; Lin et al., 2021; Sakib et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). However, examining trust and loyalty as predictors of influencer-follower relationships is still limited. Kim & Kim (2021) found that follower trust significantly predicts follower-influencer relationships and influences attitudes toward brands and purchase intentions. Sakib et al. (2020) aimed to test the credibility and physical attractiveness of influencers as key factors influencing follower compliance intentions. Sokolova & Kefi (2020) studied the interaction between influencers and followers concerning physical attractiveness, homophily, and social attractiveness, mediated by credibility and parasocial interaction on purchase intention. Lin et al. (2021) examined how followers' brand attitudes are mediated by source trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Bhattacharya (2022) empirically tested a conceptual model of parasocial interaction, including physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, source expertise, and source trustworthiness on influencer marketing outcomes, such as brand preference and purchase intention.

To address the gaps identified, this study aims to explore the dominant characteristics of influencers in forming trust relationships with followers. It investigates whether follower trust influences loyalty to influencers and brands. This research uniquely examines the impact of negative influencer publicity as a moderator, assessing the strength of the relationship between trust, influencer loyalty, and brand loyalty, providing a fresh perspective from previous studies.

Our study contributes to understanding the pivotal role of trust in shaping influencer-follower relationships and its implications for brand loyalty. The research identifies authenticity, expertise, and homophily as significant factors influencing follower trust in influencers, with authenticity emerging as particularly influential. Unlike previous studies, which often emphasize the impact of physical attractiveness, this research finds it to be less influential in the Indonesian context. Moreover, by exploring the mediating role of trust, the study underscores its critical link in enhancing both influencer and brand loyalty. Additionally, the finding that negative publicity does not significantly moderate the trust-loyalty relationship in Indonesia highlights cultural and emotional factors' influence in consumer responses to influencer communications. This study extends the current literature by providing empirical evidence on these dynamics, offering insights for marketers on strategically leveraging influencer partnerships to build enduring relationships and foster brand loyalty in the digital age.

Literature Review

Expertise

Expertise is the concept that identifies whether a source possesses sufficient knowledge and skills in a particular field (Mattson, 2005). It illustrates how experts demonstrate knowledge, experience, and problem-solving skills within their domain (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). Differentiating between experts and others, whether they are proficient or still classified as average, hinges on what the source has accomplished and knows (Bourne et al., 2014). The extent to which a communicator's message is perceived as truthful also reflects their expertise (Riley et al., 1954).

The ability to communicate effectively is evident in the quality and quantity of information provided, educational background, and professional achievements of the speaker (Kim & Kim, 2021). Individuals are more likely to trust opinions expressed by recognized experts compared to those of amateurs (Horai et al., 1974). In the realm of marketing, the expertise of various types of influencers, including celebrities and micro-celebrities, positively affects brand attitudes (Till & Busler, 2000). Key to marketing success is the influencer's ability, recognized by online consumers, to employ essential skills (Chekima et al., 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, it can be concluded that expertise derived from credible sources can align opinions and influence individual attitudes in marketing communications. Hence, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H1: Expertise of an influencer has a positive influence on trust towards the influencer.

Authenticity

Authenticity in sociology refers to an honest attitude towards oneself or others (Vannini & Franzese, 2008), embodying sincerity, truth, and originality (Molleda, 2010). In marketing communication, authenticity is seen in influencers' willingness to openly share information, both privately and publicly. With social media becoming a primary platform for marketing communications across various brands, authenticity in influencers' original intentions is crucial, especially as they endorse products and services in exchange for compensation (Evans et al., 2017).

Intention defines the belief and sincerity behind a message, which receivers can discern (Kenton, 1989). Influencer marketing hinges on the authenticity of influencers' original intentions when recommending products or services for compensation from third parties (Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). Kim & Kim (2021) note that social media followers often detect paid promotions and may question the authenticity and sincerity of such endorsements. Ultimately, the personal interests and intentions shown by the message sender significantly shape message reception and persuasion. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H2: Authenticity of an influencer has a positive influence on trust towards the influencer.

Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness describes the aesthetic physical characteristics and beauty of an individual (J. Liu, 2019), often leveraged in promotional contexts (Kahle & Homer, 1985). In online influencer relationships, physical attractiveness enhances social interactions between individuals and celebrities or public figures (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The speaker's physical attractiveness garners attention and engagement from message recipients, enhancing communication impact (Sterntal & Craig, 1982). Studies indicate that an attractive celebrity endorser positively influences purchase intentions (Khalid & Yasmeen, 2019), advertising viewability, and preference for ad endorsers (Kang, 2015).

Physical attractiveness benefits influencers in building relationships with their followers (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), with advertisers gaining multiple benefits from attractive influencer endorsements (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020). Kim & Kim (2021) further argue that initial perceptions are influenced by the physical attractiveness of the message sender. Conversely, attractiveness extends beyond physical appearance to include intellectual abilities, personality, and lifestyle (Erdogan, 1999). While previous studies suggest physical attractiveness fosters influencer-follower connections (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Liu et al., 2019), its impact may vary across contexts. In conclusion, influencers who exhibit physical attractiveness can positively influence consumer attitudes towards both brands and influencers. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H3: Physical attractiveness of an influencer has a positive influence on trust towards the influencer.

Homophily

Homophily refers to the perceived similarity in beliefs, values, experiences, and lifestyles between message senders and recipients (Gilly et al., 1998). It fosters friendly relationships among individuals sharing similar traits (Lee & Watkins, 2016), influencing recommendations made by influencers to their followers (Kim & Kim, 2021). Research shows that vloggers' popularity on platforms like YouTube is

influenced by homophily across attitudes, values, and appearance, which also enhances trust in influencers with shared characteristics (Ladhari et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020).

Perceived homophily reduces uncertainty and fosters positive feelings between message senders and recipients (Ma et al., 2015). Social media platforms facilitate the formation of personal networks based on homophilic interactions over time (Figeac & Favre, 2021), influencing user relationships in homophilic contexts (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Followers who perceive similarities in attitudes, interests, social status, and emotions with influencers tend to maintain interactions and follow them closely (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In conclusion, followers' perceptions of shared traits with influencers foster continued engagement and loyalty. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H4: Homophily of an influencer has a positive influence on trust towards the influencer.

Trust

According to Morgan & Hunt (1994), trust exists when one party desires to reliably and with integrity engage in an exchange partnership. Trust emerges when parties fulfill their commitments (Gronroos, 2015). In terms of communication, trusting the speaker entails belief and a willingness to listen to what they convey (Kim & Kim, 2021). Trust can ensure socially desired exchanges between partners and form the foundation of a relationship (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Similarly, trust in influencers gives followers confidence to be positively influenced by them. Thus, messages from trusted sources are deemed more reliable and can positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of recipients (Ohanian, 1991). Attitudes towards influencers are shaped by consumers' perceptions of their authenticity and fairness (Temperley & Tengen, 2006), as well as their perceived similarity (Kim & Kim, 2021). Ultimately, followers maintain relationship interactions and develop loyalty to the influencer. Hence, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H5: Trust has a positive influence on loyalty towards the influencer.

Conversely, trust in influencers leads followers to believe that their relationship yields benefits and enhances message effectiveness. Followers trust that influencer messages deliver positive outcomes for them, and endorsing a specific brand will benefit them (Kim & Kim, 2021). Ibrahim et al. (2021) further highlight the positive correlation between brand and influencer trust, loyalty, and intention to repurchase. The trust in influencers stems from their ability to positively influence follower attitudes towards specific brands (Chao et al., 2005; Kok Wei & Li, 2013). Consequently, followers develop loyal attitudes towards brands recommended by influencers. Therefore, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H6: Trust has a positive influence on loyalty towards the brand.

Negative Publicity

Kowalczyk & Royne (2013) posit that while celebrity endorsement can enhance brand success, it also exposes brands to risks. Negative publicity can arise before, during, or after a celebrity endorses a brand, taking various forms (Zhou & Whitla, 2013). In this study, we do not specify the types or forms of negative publicity associated with influencers. Here, negative publicity is defined as scandals or controversies surrounding influencers that question their credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness among their audience. Keller & Block (1996) suggest that exposure to negative information significantly alters consumer attitudes to become more negative than those not exposed. The impact intensifies if the negative information originates from an untrustworthy source (Yu et al., 2018). Knott & James (2004) further argue that associations with celebrities involved in scandals can adversely affect brand performance, acceptance, and the credibility of influencers (Thwaites et al., 2012). Hence, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H7: Negative publicity of influencers weakens the influence of trust on loyalty towards the influencer.

Research Method

Research Methodology and Measurement

This study employs an explanatory quantitative cross-sectional non-experimental design to examine the effects of various predictors on dependent variables. The sample consists of 202 consumers who have purchased products such as cosmetics, skincare, and gadgets after watching influencer reviews. A non-randomized convenience sampling technique was used, given the unknown population size and lack of access to the entire population. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire.

Respondents were asked to provide assessments of their favorite social media influencers, beginning with information about influencers they frequently follow and watch. They were then queried about their experiences purchasing products after watching influencer reviews. Respondents who indicated they had made such purchases proceeded to the next section of the survey; those who had not were excluded

from further participation.

Table 1. Variable instrument measurement

Factor(s)	Items	Source
Expertise	The influencers I follow have good skills in communicating product information. The influencers I follow have persuasive skills in encouraging the audience to use the products they endorse. The influencers I follow are skilled in communicating about the products.	(Janssen et al., 2022)
Authenticity	The influencers I follow are reliable in providing clear information about the products they communicate. The influencers I follow sincerely provide clear information about the products they are communicating. The influencers I follow can be trusted to provide clear information about the products they are promoting.	
Physical Attractiveness	I follow these influencers because of their attractiveness or good looks. I followed the influencer because of their attractive appearance.	(Lee & Watkins, 2016)
Homophily	Influencers and I share the same interests. Influencers and I share the same perspective. The influencer and I share the same values.	
Trust	The influencers provide reliable content related to products. The influencers reliably provide content related to products.	(Kim & Kim, 2021)
Loyalty to the Influencer	I will recommend the influencer to anyone who asks for my recommendation. I will speak positively about the influencer. I plan to continue following the influencer. I will continue to watch content from these influencers.	(Kim & Kim, 2021)
Brand Loyalty	I feel loyal to the product/brand promoted by the influencer. I will repurchase the product/brand promoted by the influencer. I will keep up with news about the product/brand. I would recommend the product to someone seeking my recommendation..	(Nam et al., 2011)
Negative Publicity	I doubt the credibility of influencers involved in scandals. I question the reliability of influencers involved in scandals. I am hesitant to trust influencers who have been involved in scandals.	(Osei-Frimpong et al., 2019)

Respondents who had purchased products after watching influencer reviews were asked to complete several measurements regarding the influencers. The instrument measured source credibility (comprising expertise and originality) and source attractiveness (comprising physical attractiveness and similarity/homophily). These two categories served as independent variables. Respondents then assessed statements regarding trust, considered a moderator variable. Loyalty to influencers and loyalty to brands were assessed through statements considered as dependent variables. Each variable was measured using a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The instrument was adapted into Indonesian and validated ($p \geq 0.2$) for accuracy and reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.7$) across time and respondents (see Table 1 for details).

The SmartPLS 3.2.9 application was used to process the study's data. Initial validity and reliability tests involved assessing factor loading values, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. Discriminant validity was tested using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) technique. The hypotheses proposed in the previous section were evaluated during the hypothesis testing stage. The model's feasibility and fit to the data were assessed using R^2 , Q^2 , SRMR, PLS Predict, and the Goodness of Fit

Index.

Data was collected from 202 respondents who filled out an online survey (Google Form). The respondents were from Generation Y (born 1985–1995) and Generation Z (born 1996–2006). A non-random accidental sampling technique was used to select respondents who had made purchases after watching YouTube videos from influencers they are subscribed to.

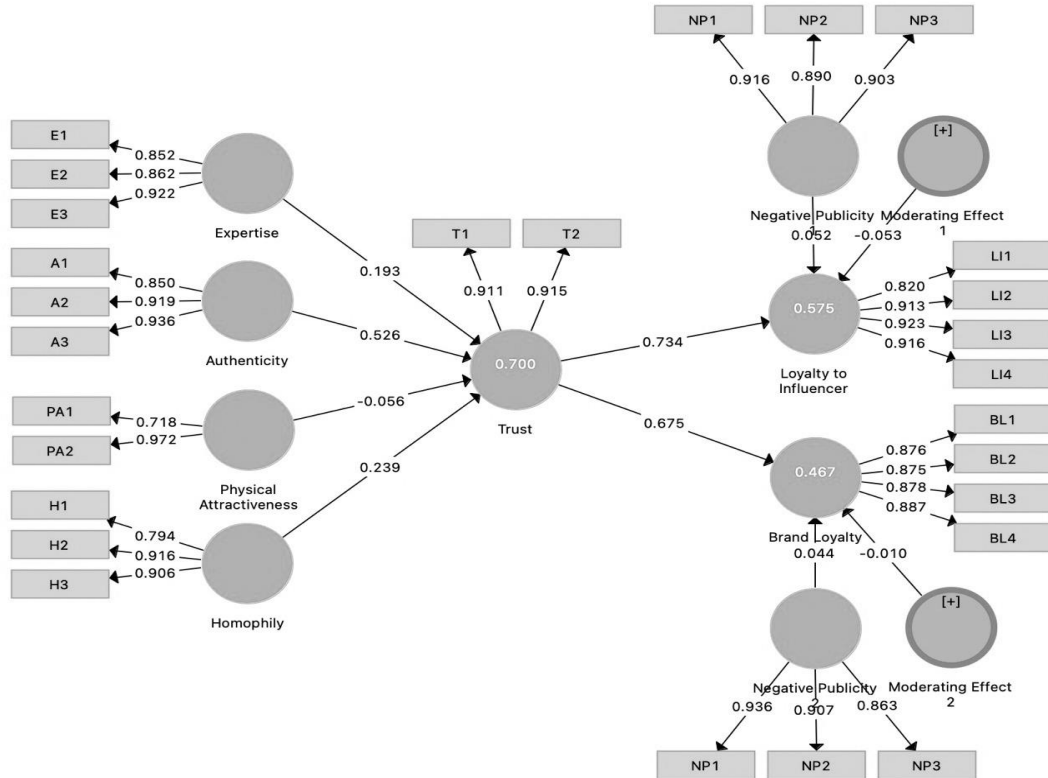


Figure 1. Result of structural equation model testing

Result and Discussion

Respondents were predominantly women (>50%) and primarily belonged to Generation Z, with an age range of 16-26 years. Most respondents were civil servants earning less than 2.5 million rupiah. The four topics respondents most frequently watched were beauty, education, culinary, and technology. Table 2 shows the characteristics of respondents based on the research data.

The research model was analyzed using SmartPLS 3.2.9. The reliability of each construct was tested with Cronbach's Alpha, where a value of 0.6 or higher is suggested for a good reliability test. Values below 0.5 indicate low reliability, 0.5–0.7 indicate moderate reliability, 0.7–0.9 indicate high reliability, and values above 0.9 indicate very good reliability (Taherdoost, 2016). Composite reliability was also tested to determine the reliability of each indicator on a variable, with values above 0.70 being preferable (Hair et al., 2014), though 0.60 is still acceptable. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value should be at least 0.50 to describe the convergent validity of a latent variable (Hair et al., 2014). A factor loading value above 0.50 is considered strong enough to validate the latent construct. Table 3 suggests that each variable

measurement is valid and reliable, with good validity ($p \geq 0.3$) and reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.7$).

Table 2. Characteristic respondent

Demographic	Type	Percentage (%)
Sex	Men	37.1
	Women	62.9
Generation	Gen Y	49.4
	Gen Z	50.6
Job(s)	Civil Servant	48
	Employee of BUMN/BUMD	2
	Private Employee	11.9
	Entrepreneur	8.4
	University Students	29.7
Income (LCU)	< 2,500,000	36.1
	2,500,000 - 5.000.000	18.8
	5,000,000 - 7,500,000	10.9
	7,500,000 - 10,000,000	23.3
	> 10,000,000	10.9
Topic(s)	Education	17.8
	Health and fitness	5.9
	Beauty	22.8
	Fashion	0.5
	Financial	0.5
	Game and Technology	18.3
	Automotive	4.5
	Decoration and Design	0.5
	Culinary	18.8
	Etc (entertainment, spiritual, sport)	10.4

Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) approach, as HTMT has superior assessment performance compared to previous methods (Henseler et al., 2015). According to Hair et al. (2014), the HTMT ratio must be less than 1 to meet good discriminant validity. Table 4 shows that the results of the discriminant validity test in this study were appropriate.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze correlations according to the proposed hypotheses. The results show that expertise ($\beta = 0.193$, $p < 0.00$), authenticity ($\beta = 0.526$, $p < 0.00$), and homophily ($\beta = 0.239$, $p < 0.00$) are positively correlated with trust in influencers. Thus, hypotheses H1, H2, and H4 are accepted. Physical attractiveness ($\beta = -0.056$, $p > 0.05$) had no significant effect on trust, so the null hypothesis was accepted. Furthermore, trust significantly affected influencer loyalty ($\beta = 0.734$, $p < 0.00$) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.682$, $p < 0.00$), accepting hypotheses H5 and H6 (see Table 5 for detail).

Figure 1 illustrates the mediation test of trust as a mediator between influencer criteria (expertise, authenticity, physical attractiveness, and homophily) and both influencer loyalty and brand loyalty using bootstrapping analysis. The results show that expertise, authenticity, and homophily significantly correlated with influencer loyalty and brand loyalty through the mediation of trust (Table 6). Therefore, trust mediates the relationship between influencer characteristics (expertise, authenticity, and homophily) and marketing communication outcomes (loyalty to influencers and brands). The moderation test results indicate that negative publicity does not significantly moderate the relationship between trust and loyalty to influencers ($\beta = -0.053$, $p > 0.05$) or between trust and brand loyalty ($\beta = -0.010$, $p > 0.05$).

Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis was used to test the theoretical models focusing on prediction studies (Ghozali & Latan, 2015). Measures to assess the acceptability of the proposed model included R^2 , Q^2 , SRMR, PLS Predict (Hair et al., 2019), and the Goodness of Fit Index (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013). According to Chin (1998), an R^2 value of 0.19 represents a low effect, 0.33 a moderate effect, and 0.66 a high effect (see Table 6). The data showed that expertise, authenticity, physical attractiveness, and homophily collectively account for 45.9% of the variance in brand loyalty and 56.8% in influencer loyalty, indicating a moderate influence. The influence on trust was high, accounting for 70% of the variance.

Q^2 assesses the predictive capability of a model, with values of 0, 0.25, and 0.50 indicating low, moderate, and high influence, respectively (Hair et al., 2019). The Q^2 value for brand loyalty was 34.6%, indicating moderate prediction accuracy, while the Q^2 value for loyalty to influencers was 44%, also indicating moderate accuracy. Trust had a Q^2 value of 56%, indicating high prediction accuracy.

The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is a measure of model fit, with a value

below 0.08 indicating suitability (Hair et al., 2019). The model estimation in this study yielded an SRMR of 0.059, indicating an acceptable fit.

The Goodness of Fit Index (GoF Index) evaluates the entire model, calculated as the square root of the average communality multiplied by the average R^2 . According to Henseler & Sarstedt (2013), values of 0.1, 0.25, and 0.36 indicate low, moderate, and high values, respectively. The GoF Index in this study was 0.567, indicating a high value.

Table 3. Measurement validity and reliability

Factor	Items	Factor Loadings FL ^a	Cronbach's Alpha α^b	Composite Reliability CR ^c	Average Variance Extracted AVE ^d
Authenticity	A1	0.850	0.885	0.929	0.815
	A2	0.919			
	A3	0.936			
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.876	0.902	0.931	0.772
	BL2	0.874			
	BL3	0.878			
	BL4	0.887			
Expertise	E1	0.852	0.852	0.911	0.773
	E2	0.862			
	E3	0.922			
Homophily	H1	0.794	0.818	0.879	0.650
	H2	0.916			
	H3	0.906			
Loyalty to Influencer	LI1	0.820	0.915	0.941	0.799
	LI2	0.913			
	LI3	0.923			
	LI4	0.916			
Negative Publicity	NP1	0.916	0.891	0.930	0.815
	NP2	0.890			
	NP3	0.903			
Physical Attractiveness	PA1	0.718	0.698	0.841	0.731
	PA2	0.972			
Trust	T1	0.911	0.801	0.909	0.834
	T2	0.915			

Table 4. Discriminant validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Authenticity (1)	0.000							
Brand loyalty (2)	0.667	0.000						
Expertise (3)	0.848	0.498	0.000					
Homophily (4)	0.573	0.665	0.470	0.000				
Loyalty to influencer (5)	0.795	0.817	0.684	0.698	0.000			
Negative publicity (6)	0.134	0.113	0.169	0.156	0.115	0.000		
Physical attractiveness (7)	0.217	0.184	0.170	0.126	0.129	0.083	0.000	
Trust (8)	0.849	0.798	0.829	0.694	0.882	0.118	0.207	0.000

Table 7 shows the PLS Predict results, validating that the proposed PLS models have good predictive power by comparing the results of the dependent indicator constructs in PLS analysis and multiple linear regression (MLR) using the Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) as an indicator (Caesarina et al., 2023). If the majority of PLS constructs produce greater errors than MLR, the predictive model has low predictive power. If fewer or the same number of PLS constructs produce lower errors than MLR, the predictive model has moderate predictive power. If no PLS construct indicators produce higher errors than MLR, the predictive model has high predictive power. This study's results indicate an equal number of comparisons between RMSE, PLS, and MLR results, concluding that the PLS model has moderate predictive power.

This study examines the role of influencer marketing, focusing on the credibility and attractiveness of sources of influence, with trust as a mediator of loyalty to influencers and brands, and negative publicity as a moderating variable. In the context of brand marketing through social media, this study provides a

perspective on the social exchange between influencers and followers, predicting the trust built in this relationship. The results indicate that influencers' expertise, authenticity, and homophily significantly contribute to building trust among followers. These findings align with [Hovland et al. \(1953\)](#), which suggest that source credibility can enhance communication interaction and persuasion, and with [Mills & Aronson \(1965\)](#), which propose that a communicator's attractiveness facilitates audience persuasion.

Table 5. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	P Values	Result
H1: Expertise → Trust	0.193	0.00	Significant
H2: Authenticity → Trust	0.526	0.00	Significant
H3: Physical Attractiveness → Trust	-0.056	0.05	Not Significant
H4: Homophily → Trust	0.239	0.00	Significant
H5: Trust → Loyalty to Influencer	0.734	0.00	Significant
H6: Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.682	0.00	Significant

Table 6. Result of Mediation Test, R² and Q², SRMR, Goodness of Fit Index

Indirect Effects	Original Sample	
Authenticity → Trust → Loyalty to Influencer	0.386	
Authenticity → Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.359	
Expertise → Trust → Loyalty to Influencer	0.141	
Expertise → Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.132	
Homophily → Trust → Loyalty to Influencer	0.175	
Homophily → Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.163	
R ² and Q ²		
	R ²	Q ²
Brand Loyalty	0.459	0.346
Loyalty to Influencer	0.568	0.440
Trust	0.700	0.566
SRMR	0.059	
Goodness of Fit Index		
Average Communality	Average R ²	GoF Index
0.750	0.428	0.567

Table 7. PLS predict

	RMSE Predict PLS	RMSE Predict LM
T1	0.514	0.537
T2	0.563	0.566
BL1	0.779	0.756
BL2	0.797	0.780
BL3	0.761	0.718
BL4	0.688	0.673
LI1	0.673	0.690
LI2	0.595	0.610
LI3	0.654	0.647
LI4	0.655	0.659

Expertise of an Influencer Positively Influences Trust

The assertion that an influencer's expertise positively influences trust is rooted in several theoretical and empirical frameworks. Expertise, in this context, refers to the perceived knowledge, skills, and reliability an influencer exhibits in a particular domain. This relationship between expertise and trust is well-supported in the literature. For instance, [Lin et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Ohanian \(1991\)](#) have demonstrated that when influencers are perceived as knowledgeable and competent, it fosters a trust-based relationship. This is because expertise signals to the audience that the influencer is a credible source of information, thus reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in the influencer's endorsements.

However, [Bhattacharya \(2022\)](#) presents a conflicting viewpoint, suggesting that influencer expertise does not significantly impact trust. This contradiction can be attributed to varying contexts, methodologies, and sample demographics used in different studies. Despite Bhattacharya's findings, the majority of the literature supports the positive impact of expertise on trust. For example, respondents often perceive their favorite influencers as having strong communication skills and the ability to persuade followers effectively ([Rasmussen, 2018](#); [Xiang et al., 2016](#)). This highlights the importance of recognized

skills and qualifications in interpersonal interactions, which are critical for influencing attitude changes (Horai et al., 1974).

The convergence of these studies suggests that while there may be exceptions, the general trend indicates that an influencer's expertise significantly bolsters trust among followers. This relationship underscores the importance of influencers demonstrating their knowledge and skills to maintain and enhance trust with their audience.

Authenticity of an Influencer Positively Influences Trust

Authenticity emerges as a crucial factor in influencing trust between influencers and their followers. Authenticity is defined by the perceived genuineness and honesty of the influencer. The findings of this study are in line with Kim & Kim (2021) and Stern (1994), which emphasize that authenticity significantly impacts trust. The results suggest that authenticity is a more dominant predictor of trust compared to expertise and homophily. Followers tend to trust influencers who they perceive as genuine and reliable, which fosters a sense of group trust (Ohanian, 1990). Authenticity, therefore, plays a pivotal role in establishing a strong and enduring trust-based relationship. This is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where the audience can easily detect insincerity. Authentic influencers are seen as more relatable and trustworthy, which enhances their ability to influence followers' attitudes and behaviors.

Physical Attractiveness of an Influencer

Contrary to the assertions of Joseph (1982) and Liu et al. (2019), this study finds that physical attractiveness does not significantly influence trust between influencers and their followers. While attractive communicators are often preferred and can positively impact associated products, this does not necessarily translate to increased trust. The findings align with Kim & Kim (2021), who also found physical attractiveness to be an insignificant factor in building trust. This suggests that while physical attractiveness may draw initial attention, it is not a key factor in forming trust-based relationships. Instead, trust is more likely to be influenced by factors such as expertise, authenticity, and homophily, which provide a more substantial basis for followers to evaluate the credibility and reliability of influencers.

Homophily of an Influencer Positively Influences Trust

Homophily, or the perceived similarity between influencers and their followers, plays a significant role in building trust. This finding is consistent with McPherson et al. (2001) and Sokolova & Kefi (2020), who highlight the importance of shared perspectives, values, and interests in fostering a positive, trust-based relationship. When followers perceive influencers as similar to themselves, they are more likely to trust them. This similarity can manifest in various ways, including shared experiences, common interests, and similar demographic characteristics. However, this finding contradicts Sakib et al. (2020), who found no significant role for homophily in building relationships between health nutrition influencers and followers. This discrepancy might be due to the specific context of health and nutrition, where expertise and factual accuracy might overshadow the importance of homophily.

Trust Influences Loyalty to Influencers and Brands

This study demonstrates that trust mediates the relationship between influencers' expertise, authenticity, and homophily, and marketing outcomes such as influencer and brand loyalty. Trust increases followers' acceptance and support, enabling influencers to influence opinions and behaviors. This finding aligns with Chang et al. (2012), Petty & Wegener (1998), and Rasmussen (2018), who have all emphasized the crucial role of trust in mediating the effectiveness of persuasive communications. When followers trust influencers, they are more likely to develop loyalty towards both the influencers and the brands they endorse. This loyalty translates into higher engagement, repeated interactions, and a greater likelihood of acting on the influencer's recommendations. Trust, therefore, serves as a foundational element that bridges the gap between influencer attributes and follower loyalty.

Negative Publicity

The study explores the moderating effect of negative publicity on the relationship between trust and loyalty to influencers and brands. Interestingly, it finds that negative publicity has no significant effect on these relationships in Indonesia. This result contradicts previous findings by Kowalczyk & Royné (2013) which suggest that negative publicity reduces trust and attitudes toward brands and influencers. One possible explanation, as proposed by Kotler & Keller (2016), is that emotional factors influence how consumers interpret information. In the Indonesian context, cultural and emotional factors might mitigate the impact of negative publicity. Yu et al. (2018) also indicate that the characteristics of negative

information can affect attitudes and purchase intentions differently, depending on how the information is presented and perceived.

Our findings highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing trust in the context of influencer marketing. While expertise, authenticity, and homophily positively influence trust, physical attractiveness does not. Trust, in turn, mediates the relationship between these factors and loyalty to influencers and brands. Negative publicity, surprisingly, does not significantly weaken this relationship in Indonesia, suggesting that cultural and emotional factors play a crucial role in how negative information is processed and its impact on trust and loyalty.

Conclusions, suggestions and limitations

The study reveals that the expertise, authenticity, and homophily of influencers significantly correlate with the trust followers place in them, with authenticity emerging as the most influential factor. Interestingly, physical attractiveness does not have a notable impact on trust. Trust serves as a mediator, amplifying the effects of influencers' expertise, authenticity, and homophily on both influencer and brand loyalty. Additionally, the study finds that negative publicity does not significantly alter the relationship between trust and loyalty to influencers and brands.

These insights carry important implications for business management. The research provides empirical evidence on the crucial role of trust-based relationships in influencer marketing. By identifying expertise, authenticity, and homophily as key trust-building factors, the study advises brands to strategically partner with influencers who embody these traits. Prioritizing influencers with strong authenticity, relevant expertise, and shared values can enhance brand loyalty. Marketers should also approach negative publicity with caution, carefully evaluating its impact before taking action.

Contributing to marketing literature, particularly in the realm of social media marketing, this study explores the dynamics between influencers and their followers. It underscores the centrality of trust in these relationships, which is essential for social exchange and maintaining ongoing interactions. The study's findings emphasize trust as a pivotal element in the influencer marketing process, particularly highlighting the roles of expertise, authenticity, physical attractiveness, and homophily. The discovery that physical attractiveness does not significantly impact trust offers a fresh perspective on influencer marketing within the Indonesian context.

Moreover, the examination of negative publicity as a moderating factor reveals it does not significantly affect brand loyalty or trust in influencers. This contributes to the literature by elucidating the mediating role of trust and the negligible moderating impact of negative publicity on brand loyalty and influencer trust.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the use of a non-randomized convenience sampling technique limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider using randomized sampling methods to enhance the representativeness of the sample. Secondly, the cross-sectional design of the study captures data at a single point in time, which may not reflect changes in influencer-follower relationships over time. Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore the dynamics of these relationships more comprehensively. Thirdly, while the study focuses on the Indonesian context, cultural differences may affect the applicability of the findings to other regions. Comparative studies across different cultural settings could provide more nuanced insights into the role of trust in influencer marketing. Lastly, the study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Future research should incorporate objective measures and experimental designs to validate and extend these findings.

Competing Interests

The author(s) declare that there are no competing interests relevant to the content of this article.

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