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Research Article

**Linking Influencers' Legitimacy and Authenticity: Focusing on Legitimacy for
Greater Authenticity, Engagement and Purchase Intention**

Mehmet Ali Paylan ^a & Buket Bora Semiz ^b

Abstract

Introduction: Influencer marketing lies at the heart of companies' and brands' digital marketing strategies. However, the extent to which consumers' perceptions of influencers' legitimacy and authenticity influence consumer behaviour has not yet been sufficiently explored. This study investigates what an influencer's unique characteristics signify in terms of cognitive, moral and pragmatic legitimacy, and how the relationship between legitimacy and authenticity translates into consumer engagement and purchase intent

Method: Data were gathered in 2024 using an online survey of 402 social media users aged 18 and older in Turkey, selected from the population using a convenience sampling method. Hypotheses regarding the research model were tested using PLS-SEM.

Results or Findings: While moral and pragmatic legitimacy were found to influence the factors of originality, no effect of cognitive legitimacy was observed. As for the factors of authenticity, it was found that the factors of truthfulness and uniqueness influence consumer engagement and, indirectly, purchase intention.

Discussion or Conclusion: Although the results cannot be generalised due to the use of a convenience sample, it has been concluded that influencers must ground their authenticity in both ethical and pragmatic principles.

Keywords: perceived legitimacy of influencer, influencer authenticity, consumer engagement, purchase intention

JEL Codes: M30, M31, M37, M39

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Araştırma Makalesi

Etkileyici Kişilerin (Influencers) Meşruiyeti ve Özgünlüğü Arasındaki Bağ: Daha Yüksek Özgünlük, Etkileşim ve Satın Alma Niyeti için Meşruiyete Odaklanmak

Mehmet Ali Paylan ^a & Buket Bora Semiz ^b

Öz

Giriş: Influencer pazarlaması, markaların dijital iletişim stratejilerinin merkezine yerleşmiştir; ancak, algılanan meşruiyet ve özgünlüğün tüketici tepkileri üzerindeki ortak etkisi yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Bu çalışma, bilişsel, ahlaki ve pragmatik meşruiyetin influencer özgünlüğüne, tüketici katılımına ve satın alma niyetine nasıl dönüştüğünü araştırmaktadır.

Yöntem: Veriler, kolay örneklem yöntemiyle seçilen, Türkiye'de 18 yaş ve üzeri 402 sosyal medya kullanıcısından 2024 yılında çevrimiçi bir anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Veriler ve önerilen model (PLS-SEM) kullanılarak analiz ve test edilmiştir.

Sonuçlar ya da Bulgular: Ahlaki ve pragmatik meşruiyet, özgünlük özelliklerini önemli ölçüde etkilerken, bilişsel meşruiyet etkilememektedir. Özgünlük özelliklerinden yalnızca dürüstlük ve benzersizlik, tüketici katılımını olumlu yönde etkilemekte ve bu da satın alma niyetini önemli ölçüde artırmaktadır. Tüketici katılımı ayrıca özgünlük özellikleri ile satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkiye aracılık etmektedir.

Tartışma ya da Yapılan Çıkarımlar: Araştırma bulguları, etkileyici kişilerin özgünlüğünü ahlaki ve pratik temellere dayalı meşruiyetle uyumlu hale getirmenin, tüketici katılımını artırmak ve satın alımları teşvik etmek için kritik önem taşıdığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: influencer'ın algılanan meşruiyeti, influencer'ın özgünlüğü, tüketici katılımı, satın alma niyeti

JEL Kodlar: M30, M31, M37, M39

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Introduction¹

Social media platforms are indispensable to companies in today's world (Agnihotri et al., 2023). Brands have changed their marketing communication strategies and increasingly rely on social media to engage consumers. The value of social media advertisement spending is projected to exceed \$345 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2024). This underlines the significance of social media and influencer marketing for companies. Influencers seek to gather, connect, and sustain like-minded audiences by exhibiting credibility, trustworthiness, relatability, and expertise (Schouten et al. 2020; Smith & Fischer, 2021) and gain legitimacy (Ki & Kim, 2019) among their followers. Pan et al. (2025), in a meta-analysis encompassing 251 studies, stated that influencer characteristics (including source credibility, authenticity signals, and social identity congruence) are factors affecting consumer attitudes, behavioral engagement, and purchase intention. However, they revealed that the impact on actual purchasing behavior is primarily driven by post-level characteristics, including the perceived authenticity and informative significance of the influencer-generated content. These findings highlight a literature gap regarding the identification of normative qualities that legitimize influencer content in the eyes of consumers.

A successful influencer-follower dynamic is sustainable when the influencer is perceived as trustworthy (Leite & Baptista, 2022). However, for them to be effective, it is especially important that they are authentic (Casaló et al. 2020). Being perceived as authentic by followers contributes to achieving the goal of increasing the number of followers (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022; Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and leads to consumer engagement (Chen et al., 2023). Pradhan et al. (2023) and Prentice et al. (2019) highlights the importance of comprehending the influence of the relationship between influencers and customers on purchasing behavior, which is essential for understanding consumer engagement with influencers. The issues that this research aims to examine stem from the debates in the literature about the authenticity and legitimacy of influencers and whether the number of followers can measure the credibility (Janssen et al., 2022), trustworthiness, number of followers or reliability of an influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020). Chung et al. (2023) suggest that sharing posts with close social ties can increase the perception of authenticity. Therefore, this finding shows that the authenticity of the influencer is more effective when it is based on social values and norms. One of the reasons that necessitated this research is what industry observers and academics have termed the "authenticity crisis." Duffek et al. (2025) state that while 88% of consumers consider authenticity to be central to their evaluation of influencer content, nearly half of active influencers are perceived as lacking authenticity, and more than a third are perceived as dishonest or lacking transparency in brand collaborations. Specifically, this demonstrates that influencers, brand managers, and consumers have fundamentally different and often inconsistent understandings of what constitutes authentic behavior, and that this inconsistency undermines consumer trust and reduces marketing effectiveness. These results indicate that authenticity is not a fixed attribute of an influencer, but rather a socially negotiated perception that is based on normative conformity. This accurately reflects the role that legitimacy theory assigns to cognitive, moral, and pragmatic evaluations.

¹ Permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of İzmir Bakırçay University with the decision dated 08.11.2023 and document number 1287.

Based on Bora Semiz and Paylan (2023), that legitimacy factors (cognitive, moral, and pragmatic) have an impact on brand attitude and brand trust within the context of influencer marketing, this study aims to establish the relationship that exists between influencer authenticity, consumer engagement, and purchase intention as determined by the legitimacy principles defined by Suchman (1995) and applied by Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020). The following questions are the focus of this study in view of the increasing evolution of influencer marketing and the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketers perceive authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020).

RQ1: Do perceived legitimacy factors affect influencer authenticity factors?

RQ2: Do perceived legitimacy factors affect consumer engagement, mediated by authenticity factors?

Based on the finding that influencers' use of social ties in their posts increases their authenticity (Chung et al., 2023), this study aims to concretize these ties in terms of legitimacy. This study aims to help brands and companies make informed decisions when partnering with influencers. This framework enables influencers to comprehend the legitimacy factors that affect their authenticity.

Literature Review

Looking at Influencer Authenticity in terms of Perceived Legitimacy

Authenticity is defined as the protection of consumer value through the fulfillment of the basic obligations and responsibilities that consumers expect from the company (Chen, You, et al., 2021; Lee & Johnson, 2022). Authenticity pertains to the consumer's perceived authenticity, uniqueness, and honesty of an influencer who acts according to their to one's own desires and authentic personality, rather than the expectations and desires of other viewers or sponsors (Kapitan et al., 2022; Kim & Baek, 2024). Consequently, a variety of studies have identified authenticity as a defining criterion for influencers to maintain their relationships with their followers and as a "ethical ideal" in terms of being genuine to oneself and one's followers. (Arnesson, 2022; Coco & Eckert, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020). Studies have shown that authenticity is examined in different conceptualizations (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Wellman et al., 2020; Zniva et al., 2023). A large body of academic literature agrees that it is a personally defined but socially constructed concept.

Additionally, studies show that authenticity factors mainly consist of attributes such as sincerity, authenticity, truthfulness, visibility, expertise, uniqueness, and authenticity (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Lee & Eastin, 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019). Authenticity is influenced by a variety of factors, including ethical behavior, consciousness, subjectivity, personal processes, and social or relational contexts (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

Chen et al. (2023) state that followers are influenced by organic content originating from "ordinary people" who are thought to be intrinsically motivated and are more persuasive and influential when they are ordinary people interacting with society. Wellman et al. (2020) argue that the ethical framework of influencers is predicated on the principles of authenticity (being true to oneself) and credibility (being true to one's audience). Research has proven that the concept of authenticity is socially constructed and that influencers should share their social ties. Therefore, the concept of authenticity should be evaluated in terms of general social norms and values. In other words, their authenticity should be constructed in terms of their legitimacy.

According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy means that people in society view an organization's actions as good and acceptable. These actions must be consistent with the norms,

values, and beliefs of society. Since, consumers are the primary stakeholders that can influence a firm's competitive advantages, it is argued that consumers can give legitimacy to firms (Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020) define consumer legitimacy as the acceptance of a firm by consumers as part of their environment. The legitimacy factors are as follows: *cognitive legitimacy* is assessed in terms of whether the organization serves as an essential and integral part of the individual and society. *Moral legitimacy* refers to the belief that an organization is morally legitimate in accordance with its values and standards. *Pragmatic legitimacy* assesses the effectiveness of activities and social outcomes in enhancing or enhancing the social lives of various individuals (Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020; Suchman, 1995). Bora Semiz and Paylan (2023) have disclosed the extent to which consumers perceive influencers as legitimate and the impact of perceived legitimacy factors on brand trust and brand attitude. The results showed that while all perceived legitimacy factors of influencers affect brand trust, moral and pragmatic legitimacy affect attitudes towards the brand. These results indicate that consumers evaluate influencers and the brands they advertise in terms of legitimacy (Bora Semiz & Paylan, 2023). Martínez-Falcó et al. (2024) conducted a study investigated the impact of influencer marketing activities on corporate social legitimacy and economic performance. Considering the existence of studies that reveal that the authenticity of influencers should be based on social ties, act like an ordinary individual in society, and behave in accordance with the ethical framework, It is critical to identify the legitimacy factors that influence the authenticity of the influencer.

Authenticity and Engagement

Consumer engagement has been defined as customers' interactions/relationships with brands (Zhang & Li, 2022), cognitive, emotional and behavioral activities (Hollebeek, 2011; Hughes et al., 2019), and a psychologically based willingness to engage with specific interaction objects (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2021). Most research agrees that consumer engagement is an antecedent to actual behavior (Myers et al., 2022). Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept that is designed to establish a comprehensive brand experience with consumers, encompassing elements such as attention, dialogue, interaction, emotions, sensory enjoyment, and immediate action from an inclusive perspective (Chen, Lin, et al., 2021; Gambetti et al., 2012).

The literature on consumer engagement emphasizes a number of potential factors that can impact consumer engagement (Hughes et al., 2019). Pradhan et al. (2023) show that the determinants of consumer engagement are more likely to be the source credibility model and parasocial interactions. Li and Feng (2022) examined nation branding and influencer authenticity and stated that influencer authenticity is an important factor in increasing influencer-follower engagement. Other studies have found that high levels of perceived authenticity increase influencers' engagement rates on Instagram (Valentini et al., 2018) and that increased follower engagement is positively correlated with perceived authenticity and attractiveness (Miguel et al., 2022; Pöyry et al., 2019). According to Walsh et al. (2024), when a brand's relationship with influencers is supported through sponsorship, the influencers are perceived as less authentic by consumers, which damages their authenticity perception and decreases consumer interactions with the brand. Additionally, Eigenraam et al. (2021) show that consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of digital engagement initiatives are related to their ongoing customer engagement with the brand.

Consumer Engagement and Purchase Behavior

Past studies, such as Breves et al. (2021) and Trivedi and Sama (2020), show that influencer mechanisms such as source-credibility and sharing experiences (Audrezet et al., 2020) affect purchase intentions. Existing studies have shown that consumer engagement contributes to competitive advantage and improved economic performance (Wang & Huang, 2023). The findings show that consumer engagement significantly affects purchase behavior and brand loyalty (Prentice et al., 2019). Wang and Huang (2023) demonstrate that community-purchasing behavior is influenced by two distinct forms of consumer engagement: content participation and creation. Despite the evidence indicating a correlation between consumer engagement and purchase behavior, there is currently no additional evidence to support the relationship between consumer engagement with influencers and purchase behavior.

Mediating Role of Authenticity and Consumer Engagement

Being authentic is a desirable quality for an influencer (Lee & Eastin, 2021), so people are more likely to respond to influencers' social media performance who is authentic (Nah, 2022). Perceived authenticity significantly influences consumer engagement with influencer messages on social media. For example, when a product's information is promoted through a non-celebrity influencer's regular appearance (Casaló et al., 2020; Ren et al., 2023), consumers are more inclined to embrace the message because they perceive it as more genuine (Bi & Zhang, 2023; Lou & Yuan, 2019). An influencer-consumer relationship developed in this way leads to a positive attitude towards the product that was recommended and the subsequent increase in purchase intentions (Zhang et al., 2023). Studies have found that Instagram models perceived as authentic in the context of visual authenticity lead to increased purchase intentions (Shoenberger & Kim, 2023; Shoenberger et al., 2020). Moreover, in support of and , when consumers perceive influencers as unique and consistent, the extent to which their authenticity is perceived increases (Zniva et al., 2023). Here, we provide supplementary context to identify which of the influencer's perceived authenticity factors mediate the relationship between the influencer's perceived legitimacy and the consumer's engagement.

Studies have shown that engagement with branded content also mediates the relationship between parasocial identity, trust, and attitudes towards this type of content (Chen, Lin, et al., 2021). In addition, Dankwa (2021) demonstrated that the relationship between informativeness (complete mediation) and advertising creativity (partial mediation) in social media advertising and consumer decision-making is influenced by consumer engagement.

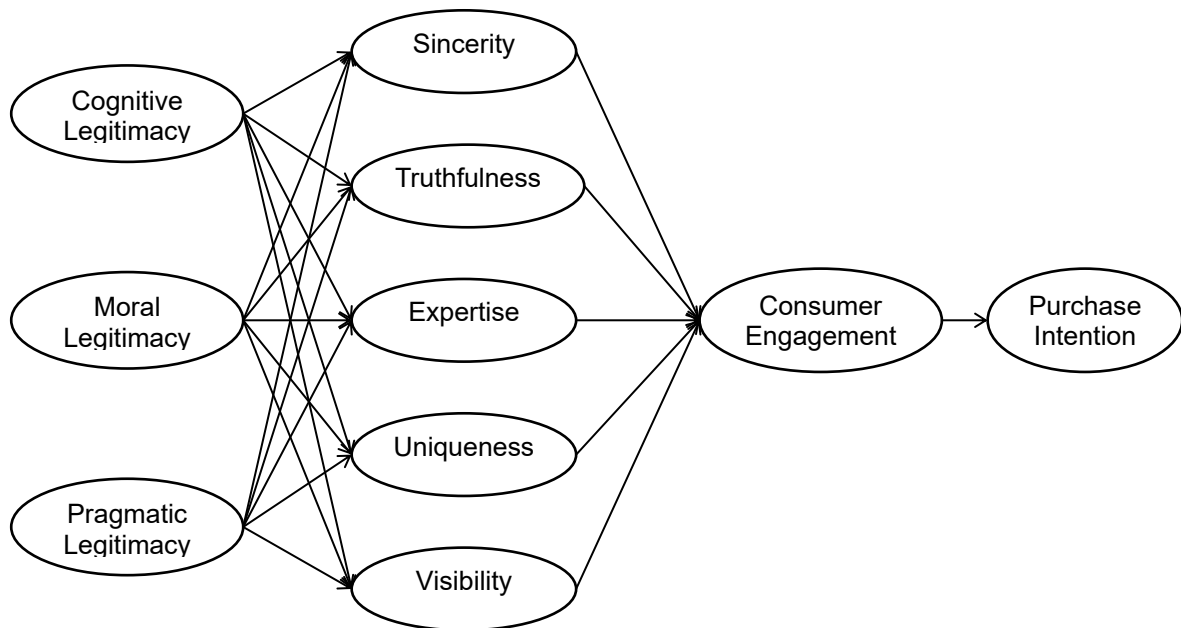
Methodology

Research Model

As shown in Figure 1, our research model is to investigate the relationships between perceived legitimacy of influencers and influencers' authenticity factors. Beside this aim we also try to make it clear that how this relationship reflects to purchase intention and consumer engagement.

Figure 1

Proposed Research Model



Note. This figure was created by authors via Microsoft Word

Hypothesis

H1a-e: Perceived cognitive legitimacy affects authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, e-visibility).

H2a-e: Perceived moral legitimacy affects authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, e-visibility).

H3a-e: Perceived pragmatic legitimacy affects authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, e-visibility).

H4a-e: Influencers' authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, e-visibility) affect consumer engagement.

H5: Consumer engagement affects purchase intentions.

H6a-e: Influencers' authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, and e-visibility) mediate the relationship between consumer engagement and perceived cognitive legitimacy.

H7a-e: Influencers' authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, and e-visibility) mediate the relationship between consumer engagement and perceived moral legitimacy.

H8a-e: Influencers' authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, and e-visibility) mediate the relationship between consumer engagement and perceived pragmatic legitimacy.

H9a-e: Consumer engagement mediates the relationship between influencers' authenticity attributes (a-sincerity, b-truthfulness, c-expertise, d-uniqueness, and e-visibility) and purchase intention.

Sampling and Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in 2024 from a sample of 402 individuals, predominantly those aged 18 years or older, residing in Turkey, and possessing social media accounts to test the hypotheses. The sample was selected through convenience sampling. Through Google Forms, data were obtained through a Turkish-language questionnaire. Considering budgetary and time constraints, the convenience sampling method was implemented, despite certain constraints regarding the generalizability of the results. Consequently, analyses were performed on data from 402 participants. The Ethics Committee of the İzmir Bakırçay University has granted permission for the use of a convenience sampling method in this study, as evidenced by the decision dated 08.11.2023 and document number 1287.

Measures

The influencers' perceived legitimacy scale was derived from (Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020) and Bora Semiz and Paylan (2023)). The scale has three dimensions: cognitive, ethical, and pragmatic legitimacy, and consists of 12 statements. Authenticity factors of influencers were adapted from Lee and Eastin (2021) and Agnihotri et al. (2023) and measured with a total of 18 items. Consumer engagement and purchase intention were adapted from Chen, Lin, et al. (2021). Consumer engagement was measured using five items, and purchase intention with 3 items, and all variables were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale. In addition, the survey included six questions on social media use and influencer follow-up and six demographic questions.

Common Method Bias

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to assess common method bias in PLS-SEM studies, utilizing Harman's single factor (Fuller et al., 2016; Jordan & Troth, 2020). To prevent common method bias, the explained variance values should not exceed 0.5 and a particular factor should not be greater. The factor score was 0.48 when all variables were aggregated in a single factor, as indicated by the test. It can be concluded that there is no common method bias, as the value is not greater than 0.5 (Kock, 2021).

Findings

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Of the participants, 73.9% were women. Participants born between 2000 and 2005 constituted 57.7% of the sample in terms of age. The study included 31.6% of undergraduates and 28.4% of secondary school graduates in terms of their educational background.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics*

Gender	f	%	Education Level	f	%
Female	297	73.9	Primary School	3	0.7
Male	105	26.1	High School	114	28.4
Age	f	%	Two-year Degree	100	24.9
1965-1979	8	2.0	Undergraduate	127	31.6
1980-1999	162	40.3	Postgraduate	58	14.4
2000-2005	232	57.7	Occupation	f	%
Marital Status	f	%	Officer	45	11.2
Married	106	26.4	Craft/Tradesman	7	1.7
Single	296	73.6	Self-employment	22	5.5
Income Level*	f	%	Student	211	52.5
11500 TL and below	102	25.4	Housewife	15	3.7
11501-20000 TL	65	16.2	Unemployed	28	7.0
20001-30000 TL	73	18.2	Employee	54	13.4
30001-40000 TL	54	13.4	Others	20	4.9
40001-50000 TL	39	9.7			
50001 TL and above	69	17.2			

Note. Created by authors using Jamovi.org

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Table 2 presents the results of the confirmatory factor analysis. The expression does not require removal from the analysis if the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) values of the structure representing the expression exceed the threshold value, despite the fact that the factor load of the expression is less than 0.708 (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 2*Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results*

	Factor Loadings	Cro. Alpha	CR	AVE
Cognitive Legitimacy (CL)				
CL3. [...is a phenomenon that has no alternative for the community that follows him/her.]	0,61	0,803	0,869	0,621
CL2. [... is a vital member of the community that follows him/her]	0,797			
CL1. [... is a complementary (permanent) member of the community that follows him/her]	0,877			
CL4. [... represents the community of followers of which I am a member.]	0,843			
Moral Legitimacy (ML)				
ML4. [...is knowledgeable.]	0,926	0,963	0,964	0,901
ML1. [... is honest.]	0,954			
ML3. [...is respected.]	0,962			
ML2. [...is reliable.]	0,954			
Pragmatic Legitimacy (PL)				

PL1. [... in general, his/her posts about products are useful for me.]	0,882	0,914	0,914	0,795
PL2. [... in general, his/her posts about products are suitable for my lifestyle.]	0,905			
PL4. [... his/her posts about products in general reflect the practical values of his followers in daily life.]	0,872			
PL3. [... in general, his/her product-related posts are in line with the lifestyle of his followers.]	0,907			
Sincerity (SIN)				
SIN4. [... is realistic.]	0,919	0,956	0,957	0,885
SIN2. [... is kind.]	0,949			
SIN1. [... is gentle.]	0,943			
SIN3. [... is sincere.]	0,951			
Truthfulness (TRT)				
TRT3. [... introduces products that they will actually use/use.]	0,943	0,899	0,913	0,833
TRT1. [... provides meaningful/non-misleading information about products, although it advertises in its posts.]	0,852			
TRT2. [... makes very honest comments about the brands he shares.]	0,94			
Expertise (EXP)				
EXP1. [... is skilled in his/her field.]	0,973	0,958	0,962	0,923
EXP2. [... is knowledgeable in its field.]	0,971			
EXP3. [...has a natural talent in its field.]	0,939			
Uniqueness (UNQ)				
UNQ1.[... is unique.]	0,832	0,861	0,873	0,783
UNQ2. [... has a different character.]	0,916			
UNQ3. [... contents are not a copy of someone else's.]	0,904			
Visibility (VSB)				
VSB2. [... talks about the real issues going on in his/her life.]	0,934	0,911	0,946	0,789
VSB1. [... shares not only the good things in his/her life but also the negative things he/she encounters.]	0,922			
VSB3. [... talks about his own shortcomings and does not hesitate to publicize them.]	0,926			
VSB4. [... publicly discloses many things about his private life.]	0,758			
Consumer Engagement (ENG)				
ENG3. [... I share posts related to their posts.]	0,559	0,799	0,845	0,523
ENG4. [...'like' their posts.]	0,857			
ENG5. [...I recommend their posts about the brand.]	0,77			
ENG2. [... I comment on their posts.]	0,582			
ENG1. [... I watch/read the posts.]	0,798			
Purchase Intention (PI)				
PI3. [I will probably buy a product or products recommended by the influencer I follow.]	0,939	0,923	0,923	0,867
PI2. [I intend to buy a product or products recommended by the influencer I follow.]	0,943			
PI1. [I will definitely buy the product or products recommended by the influencer I follow in the near future.]	0,91			

Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS and Jamovi.org

The factor load of the statement “[... is down to earth)]” in which sincerity dimension was below 0.708. The CR value of the structure representing this expression was below 0.7,

and the AVE was below 0.5; therefore, the item was excluded from the analysis. We can infer that the scales' convergent validity was satisfactory since the AVE and CR values of the other structures exceeded the threshold values (Table 2). The reliability or internal consistency of the scales was ensured by the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the dimensions and the convergent validity coefficients (CR) exceeding the criterion value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2014).

Table 3
Fornell & Larcker's Discriminant Validity Results

	CL	ENG	EXP	ML	PI	PL	SIN	TRT	UNQ	VSB
CL	0.788									
ENG	0.409	0.723								
EXP	0.411	0.460	0.961							
ML	0.582	0.484	0.707	0.949						
PI	0.373	0.680	0.315	0.349	0.931					
PL	0.520	0.475	0.642	0.720	0.384	0.891				
SIN	0.421	0.476	0.855	0.744	0.355	0.673	0.941			
TRT	0.418	0.502	0.778	0.673	0.431	0.631	0.833	0.913		
UNQ	0.452	0.468	0.790	0.652	0.368	0.568	0.750	0.735	0.885	
VSB	0.402	0.447	0.791	0.606	0.387	0.603	0.774	0.788	0.782	0.888

Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS

Convergent validity consists of three stages: Fornell and Larcker criteria, cross loading and factor loadings, and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criteria. The Fornell and Larcker criteria is the first stage of convergent validity, and its values was shown that Table 3. The square roots of the AVE values are represented by the dark and italic numbers, which are diagonally displayed in the table. The other values represent the correlation coefficients of the variables. According to Fornell & Larcker (1981), the correlation coefficients of the variables should not exceed the average variance extracted (AVE) value that represents the same structure. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Fornell-Larcker criterion was satisfied considering the values in Table 3.

Table 4
Factor Loadings and Cross Loadings

	CL	ENG	EXP	ML	PI	PL	SIN	TRT	UNQ	VSB
CL1	0.877	0.405	0.427	0.559	0.336	0.485	0.449	0.414	0.424	0.358
CL2	0.797	0.239	0.260	0.387	0.260	0.342	0.236	0.259	0.302	0.263
CL3	0.610	0.245	0.105	0.262	0.221	0.170	0.091	0.146	0.247	0.181
CL4	0.843	0.357	0.378	0.528	0.331	0.515	0.402	0.394	0.401	0.398
ENG1	0.375	0.798	0.522	0.507	0.487	0.478	0.551	0.495	0.456	0.429
ENG2	0.226	0.582	-0.005	0.123	0.425	0.119	-0.008	0.081	0.128	0.083
ENG3	0.206	0.559	-0.008	0.092	0.458	0.098	-0.008	0.126	0.163	0.126
ENG4	0.320	0.857	0.468	0.460	0.500	0.418	0.486	0.466	0.460	0.440
ENG5	0.306	0.770	0.275	0.296	0.655	0.354	0.272	0.364	0.276	0.298

EXP1	0.396	0.453	0.973	0.692	0.310	0.625	0.838	0.768	0.758	0.777
EXP2	0.421	0.443	0.971	0.710	0.307	0.646	0.842	0.757	0.752	0.763
EXP3	0.365	0.429	0.939	0.632	0.291	0.577	0.782	0.717	0.771	0.741
ML1	0.561	0.443	0.652	0.954	0.323	0.663	0.697	0.639	0.626	0.567
ML2	0.559	0.471	0.680	0.962	0.369	0.680	0.720	0.664	0.627	0.589
ML3	0.561	0.454	0.655	0.954	0.329	0.683	0.691	0.611	0.612	0.552
ML4	0.530	0.469	0.695	0.926	0.302	0.705	0.716	0.640	0.609	0.591
PI1	0.313	0.640	0.244	0.279	0.910	0.326	0.292	0.378	0.314	0.343
PI2	0.378	0.629	0.331	0.360	0.943	0.391	0.364	0.425	0.369	0.377
PI3	0.350	0.629	0.305	0.336	0.939	0.354	0.336	0.401	0.346	0.361
PL1	0.441	0.456	0.593	0.684	0.402	0.882	0.621	0.597	0.499	0.533
PL2	0.471	0.422	0.554	0.657	0.384	0.905	0.592	0.559	0.495	0.524
PL3	0.478	0.409	0.587	0.634	0.303	0.907	0.617	0.548	0.519	0.534
PL4	0.466	0.405	0.554	0.590	0.277	0.872	0.567	0.545	0.514	0.558
SIN1	0.367	0.453	0.771	0.661	0.336	0.612	0.943	0.742	0.641	0.679
SIN2	0.371	0.445	0.774	0.670	0.324	0.617	0.949	0.749	0.638	0.682
SIN3	0.418	0.435	0.835	0.723	0.319	0.653	0.951	0.807	0.762	0.773
SIN4	0.423	0.458	0.830	0.739	0.355	0.646	0.919	0.830	0.772	0.772
TRT1	0.337	0.429	0.627	0.502	0.357	0.509	0.681	0.852	0.558	0.633
TRT2	0.391	0.476	0.717	0.638	0.414	0.576	0.774	0.940	0.708	0.750
TRT3	0.410	0.468	0.776	0.687	0.407	0.634	0.816	0.943	0.730	0.765
UNQ1	0.411	0.347	0.553	0.491	0.268	0.406	0.519	0.549	0.832	0.559
UNQ2	0.407	0.424	0.728	0.570	0.360	0.542	0.686	0.669	0.916	0.756
UNQ3	0.387	0.462	0.793	0.655	0.342	0.546	0.762	0.717	0.904	0.742
VSBI	0.429	0.442	0.773	0.624	0.350	0.605	0.770	0.771	0.754	0.922
VSBI	0.395	0.428	0.760	0.586	0.386	0.584	0.734	0.741	0.717	0.934
VSBI	0.340	0.414	0.740	0.565	0.349	0.543	0.723	0.731	0.726	0.926
VSBI	0.218	0.265	0.470	0.295	0.277	0.352	0.455	0.506	0.554	0.758

Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS

The second stage of discriminant validity was factor loadings and cross-loadings. It is expected that there will be a difference of at least 0.1 between the factor loadings and cross-loadings of each variable. In this case, the items do not overlap (Yıldız, 2020). In Table 4, the bold values represent the factor loadings of the variables. The other values are cross-loadings. When the table is examined, it is seen that there are differences greater than 0.1 between the

cross-loadings and factor loadings; therefore, there are no overlapping items. Discriminant validity was also met according to the factor loadings and cross-loadings.

Table 5

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Results for Discriminant Validity

	CL	ENG	EXP	ML	PI	PL	SIN	TRT	UNQ	VSB
CL										
ENG	0.474									
EXP	0.420	0.396								
ML	0.622	0.452	0.734							
PI	0.421	0.790	0.335	0.370						
PL	0.557	0.461	0.685	0.766	0.418					
SIN	0.422	0.422	0.890	0.773	0.377	0.718				
TRT	0.447	0.485	0.834	0.717	0.473	0.693	0.893			
UNQ	0.525	0.481	0.861	0.710	0.410	0.635	0.814	0.823		
VSB	0.431	0.430	0.826	0.622	0.419	0.643	0.807	0.852	0.868	

Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS

Discriminant validity was further assessed using the HTMT criterion (Table 5). All HTMT values remained below the liberal 0.90 threshold (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019), supporting discriminant validity at this level. It must, however, be acknowledged that several pairs among the authenticity dimensions approach this threshold and exceed the more conservative 0.85 criterion recommended by Henseler et al. (2015)—most notably sincerity–truthfulness (0.893), sincerity–expertise (0.890), uniqueness–expertise (0.861), uniqueness–visibility (0.868), and truthfulness–visibility (0.852). These elevated values indicate a degree of empirical overlap among the closely related authenticity sub-dimensions; this issue is revisited in the discussion as a measurement limitation.

Testing the Research Model

The research model (Figure 1) and the hypotheses were subjected to PLS-SEM testing. Firstly, the research model is tested and secondly, direct and indirect effect analyses will be conducted and results shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Research Model Results

Hypothesis	Path Analysis	VIF	Q ²	f ²	R ²
H_{1a}	CL -> SIN	1.564		0.007	
H_{2a}	ML -> SIN	2.364	0.588	0.337	0.596
H_{3a}	PL -> SIN	2.143		0.103	
H_{1b}	CL -> TRT	1.564		0.000	
H_{2b}	ML -> TRT	2.364	0.487	0.176	0.498
H_{3b}	PL -> TRT	2.143		0.087	
H_{1c}	CL -> EXP	1.564		0.003	
H_{2c}	ML -> EXP	2.364	0.529	0.254	0.538
H_{3c}	PL -> EXP	2.143		0.083	
H_{1d}	CL -> UNQ	1.564		0.008	
H_{2d}	ML -> UNQ	2.364	0.436	0.168	0.449

H_{3d}	PL -> UNQ	2.143		0.030	
H_{1e}	CL -> VSB	1.564		0.001	
H_{2e}	ML -> VSB	2.364	0.411	0.088	0.425
H_{3e}	PL -> VSB	2.143		0.094	
H_{4a}	SIN->ENG	5.117		0.002	
H_{4b}	TRT->ENG	3.999		0.026	
H_{4c}	EXP -> ENG	4.845	0.201	0.000	0.277
H_{4d}	UNQ -> ENG	3.320		0.013	
H_{4e}	VSB -> ENG	3.778		0.000	
H₅	ENG -> PI	1.000	0.129	0.860	0.462

Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS

Hair et al. (2011) mentioned that the rate at which the independent variable explains the dependent variable is denoted by the R^2 value. A value between 0.25-0.49 is considered weak, 0.50-0.74 is considered medium, and 0.75 and above indicates a high level of explanatory power. In addition, the SmartPLS program suggests that a calculated R^2 as 10% may be adequate. In Table 6, when the R^2 values of the legitimacy factors (independent variables) are examined, the independent variables explain the influencers' authenticity attributes (sincerity, truthfulness, expertise, uniqueness, and visibility) by approximately 60%, 50%, 54%, 45%, and 43%, respectively. Moreover, the R^2 values for customer engagement and the R^2 value of purchase intention were 28% and 46%, respectively. In this case, it can be said that legitimacy factors explain some influencers' authenticity attributes at a weak level and others at a moderate level. In addition, the influencers' authenticity attributes weakly explained customer engagement, and customer engagement weakly explained purchase intention.

Another value in Table 6 is the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which indicates whether there is a multicollinearity issue. As stated by Kock (2015), when factor-based PLS-SEM algorithms are implemented, the VIF threshold utilized in conventional method bias tests should perhaps be slightly elevated from 3.3. According to Hair et al. (2009) and Kock and Lynn (2012) the VIF value may be below 5. Table 6 shows that all variables (except one) are below five (5). One variable is slightly greater than five (5); however, according to O'Brien (2007) and Ringle et al. (2015), it may be below ten (10). Therefore, Table 6 demonstrates that the VIF values are not indicative of a multicollinearity issue by the inner model variables.

The research model's Q^2 effect values were determined using blindfolding analysis, also known as PLSpredict analysis. When the Q^2 value exceeds zero, it indicates that the model is capable of predicting endogenous variables. (Hair et al., 2014). As a result of the PLSpredict analysis, Table 6 shows Q^2 value for the customer engagement (ENG) was 0.201, expertise (EXP) was 0.529, purchase intention (PI) was 0.129, sincerity (SIN) was 0.588, truthfulness (TRT) was 0.487, uniqueness (UNQ) was 0.436 and the visibility (VSB) was 0.411. Finally, the endogenous constructs' Q^2 values were greater than zero, thereby confirming predictive relevance.

The effect size values (f^2) are an additional indicator that necessitates assessment and are listed in Table 6. Sarstedt et al. (2022) asserted that f^2 values below 0.02 are insignificant. Accordingly, it is possible to say that the cognitive legitimacy influence on influencers' authenticity attributes ($f_{SIN}^2=0.007$, $f_{TRT}^2=0.000$, $f_{EXP}^2=0.003$, $f_{UNQ}^2=0.008$, $f_{VSB}^2=0.001$) is insignificant. Additionally, the effect sizes of sincerity, expertise, uniqueness, and visibility ($f_{SIN}^2=0.002$, $f_{EXP}^2=0.000$, $f_{UNQ}^2=0.013$, $f_{VSB}^2=0.000$) on customer engagement are insignificant. The low effect size coefficients were due to indirect effects. As stated by Cohen (1992), for effect values of 0.02 and above, the magnitude is low, 0.15 and above is medium,

and 0.35 and above is high. The power of moral legitimacy to affect sincerity and expertise ($f_{\text{SIN}}^2=0.337$ and $f_{\text{EXP}}^2=0.254$) was at a medium level. In addition, customer engagement ($f_{\text{PI}}^2=0.860$) had a strong influence on purchase intention. The other independent variables affecting the dependent variables were at a low level.

Table 7

Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path Analysis	Std. Beta	Std. Dev.	t	p*	Results
H _{1a}	CL -> SIN	-0.065	0.040	1.609	0.108	Rejected
H _{1b}	CL -> TRT	-0.008	0.048	0.165	0.869	Rejected
H _{1c}	CL -> EXP	-0.045	0.046	0.989	0.323	Rejected
H _{1d}	CL -> UNQ	0.080	0.053	1.517	0.129	Rejected
H _{1e}	CL -> VSB	0.023	0.052	0.435	0.664	Rejected
H _{2a}	ML -> SIN	0.567	0.054	10.604	0.000	Accepted
H _{2b}	ML -> TRT	0.458	0.063	7.229	0.000	Accepted
H _{2c}	ML -> EXP	0.527	0.057	9.222	0.000	Accepted
H _{2d}	ML -> UNQ	0.469	0.069	6.789	0.000	Accepted
H _{2e}	ML -> VSB	0.345	0.064	5.368	0.000	Accepted
H _{3a}	PL -> SIN	0.298	0.058	5.154	0.000	Accepted
H _{3b}	PL -> TRT	0.306	0.069	4.421	0.000	Accepted
H _{3c}	PL -> EXP	0.286	0.063	4.572	0.000	Accepted
H _{3d}	PL -> UNQ	0.189	0.074	2.563	0.010	Accepted
H _{3e}	PL -> VSB	0.341	0.066	5.143	0.000	Accepted
H _{4a}	SIN->ENG	-0.003	0.102	0.025	0.980	Rejected
H _{4b}	TRT->ENG	0.308	0.083	3.707	0.000	Accepted
H _{4c}	EXP -> ENG	-0.033	0.095	0.351	0.725	Rejected
H _{4d}	UNQ -> ENG	0.210	0.077	2.724	0.006	Accepted
H _{4e}	VSB -> ENG	0.028	0.081	0.344	0.731	Rejected
H ₅	ENG -> PI	0.693	0.028	24.499	0.000	Accepted

*p<0.05

Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS

According to Table 7, moral and pragmatic legitimacy significantly affect influencers' authenticity attributes (sincerity, truthfulness, expertise, uniqueness, and visibility). Thus, H_{2a-e} and H_{3a-e} are supported. Additionally, cognitive legitimacy does not affect influencers' authenticity attributes (sincerity, truthfulness, expertise, uniqueness, and visibility); thus, H_{1a-e} are not supported. Some influencers' authenticity attributes (truthfulness and uniqueness) affect customer engagement, but the other influencers' authenticity attributes (sincerity, expertise, and visibility) do not affect customer engagement. Thus, H_{4b} and H_{4d} are supported, but H_{4a}, H_{4c}, and H_{4e} are not. Customer engagement significantly influences purchase intention. So, H₅ is supported.

Table 8

Indirect Effects

Hypothesis	Path Analysis	Std. Beta	Std. Dev.	t	p*	Results
H _{6a}	CL -> SIN -> ENG	0.000	0.008	0.022	0.982	Rejected
H _{6b}	CL -> TRT -> ENG	-0.002	0.015	0.159	0.874	Rejected
H _{6c}	CL -> EXP -> ENG	0.002	0.006	0.244	0.807	Rejected
H _{6d}	CL -> UNQ -> ENG	0.017	0.014	1.225	0.221	Rejected
H _{6e}	CL -> VSB -> ENG	0.001	0.005	0.129	0.898	Rejected
H _{7a}	ML -> SIN -> ENG	-0.001	0.058	0.025	0.980	Rejected
H _{7b}	ML -> TRT -> ENG	0.141	0.042	3.333	0.001	Accepted
H _{7c}	ML -> EXP -> ENG	-0.018	0.051	0.347	0.729	Rejected
H _{7d}	ML -> UNQ -> ENG	0.098	0.040	2.487	0.013	Accepted
H _{7e}	-ML -> VSB -> ENG	0.010	0.029	0.336	0.737	Rejected
H _{8a}	PL -> SIN -> ENG	-0.001	0.031	0.024	0.980	Rejected
H _{8b}	PL -> TRT -> ENG	0.094	0.035	2.699	0.007	Accepted
H _{8c}	PL -> EXP -> ENG	-0.010	0.028	0.346	0.729	Rejected
H _{8d}	PL -> UNQ -> ENG	0.040	0.023	1.746	0.081	Rejected
H _{8e}	PL -> VSB -> ENG	0.009	0.028	0.338	0.736	Rejected
H _{9a}	SIN -> ENG -> PI	-0.002	0.071	0.025	0.980	Rejected
H _{9b}	TRT -> ENG -> PI	0.213	0.060	3.581	0.000	Accepted
H _{9c}	EXP -> ENG -> PI	-0.023	0.066	0.351	0.726	Rejected
H _{9d}	UNQ -> ENG -> PI	0.145	0.054	2.691	0.007	Accepted
H _{9e}	VSB -> ENG -> PI	0.019	0.056	0.343	0.732	Rejected

*p<0.05

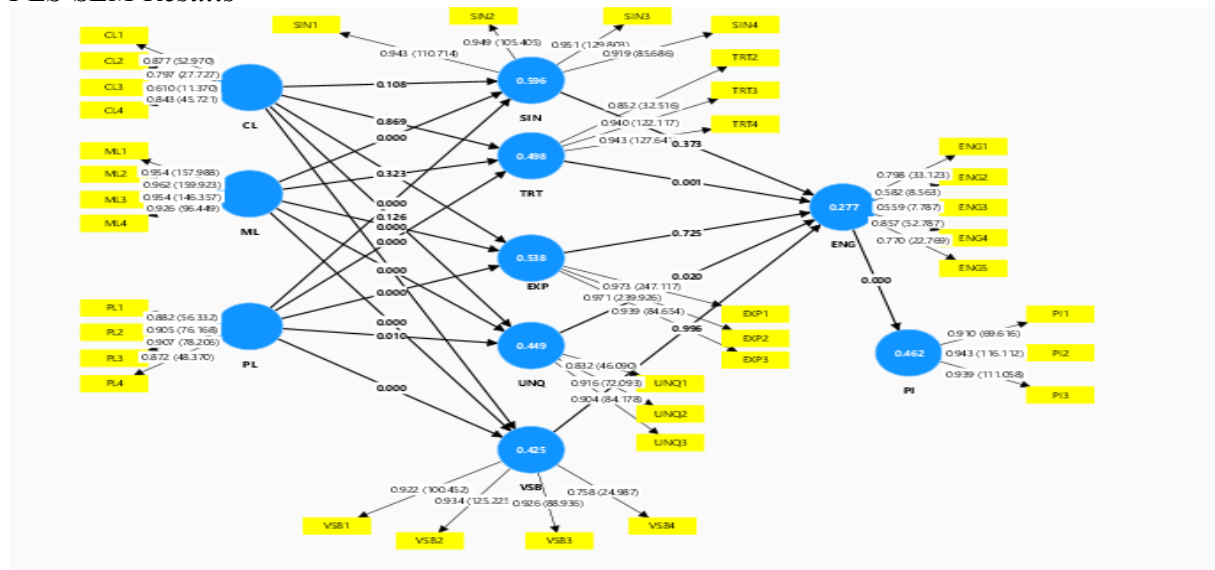
Note. Created by authors using SmartPLS

As stated by Zhao et al. (2010), if the indirect effects between variables in the mediating effect analysis are significant, the mediating effect can be discussed. The path analysis in Table 8 illustrates the indirect effects. All of the dimensions did not have statistically significant indirect effects. In this case, the truthfulness and uniqueness of influencers partially mediate the relationship between moral legitimacy and consumer engagement as indicated by Zhao et al. (2010). Moreover, truthfulness partially integrates the mediation of the relationship between pragmatic legitimacy and customer engagement. Customer engagement partially mediates the relationship between truthfulness and uniqueness in purchase intention. Thus, H_{7b}, H_{7d}, H_{8b}, H_{9b}, and H_{9d} were supported for the partial mediating effect.

Figure 2 shows that the regression coefficients were between 0.610-0.877 for CL, 0.926-0.962 for ML, and 0.872-0.907 for PL. This figure shows that the regression coefficients of influencers' authenticity attributes are between 0.919-0.951 for sincerity; are between 0.852-0.943 for truthfulness, between 0.939-0.973 for expertise; are between 0.832-0.916 for uniqueness, and between 0.758-0.934 for visibility. In addition, the regression coefficients are between 0.559-0.857 for customer engagement and between 0.910-0.943 for purchase intention.

Figure 2

PLS-SEM Results



Note. Figure 2 was created via SmartPLS, where Arial font customization is not supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

Studies on influencer marketing have recognized the importance of authenticity for social media influencers. Consumers increasingly demand authenticity from products and brands, and authenticity is known to improve message receptivity and increase perceived quality and purchase intentions. According to Eigenraam et al. (2021), informative initiatives are perceived as equally authentic, regardless of the brand type. The fact that the informative initiative is seen as authentic from the perspective of the follower can be considered to explain the significant effect of the influencer's truthfulness on loyalty. According to Visentin et al. (2019), the accuracy of an influencer's content significantly influences consumer behavioral intentions and engagement. When followers perceive the content to be accurate and consistent with their values, they are more inclined to interact with the messages and brand endorsements of an influencer. Wang and Huang (2023) found that expertise and knowledge power significantly increased consumer engagement, whereas uniqueness and sincerity had lesser direct effects. argued that influencers' expertise and uniqueness positively influence consumer engagement; however, the impact of sincerity and authenticity on engagement outcomes has not been directly tested. Kumar et al. (2022) found that visibility and friendliness significantly influence consumer engagement; however, expertise and uniqueness do not have a direct impact. (Shen, 2021) found that micro-influencers' sincerity and uniqueness positively influenced consumer engagement, whereas their expertise and visibility did not. Lee & Eastin (2021) found that sincerity is the strongest factor determining consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. In our study, sincerity did not affect engagement. In terms of visibility and truthfulness, our study is similar to Lee and Eastin (2021) in that truthfulness significantly affects engagement, whereas visibility does not. Both studies share the common conclusion that the uniqueness of the influencer has an impact on engagement. In general, we conclude that different authenticity attributes are important for different consumer groups due to reasons such as sample, country, brand collaborating with the influencer, and which category the influencer is in. The results of our study are consistent with those of Brodie et al. (2013) and Pradhan et

al. (2023), indicating that interaction leads to outcomes such as consumer loyalty, satisfaction, emotional attachment, trust, and commitment.

When the present findings are compared with prior evidence, three patterns warrant closer examination. First, the lack of a significant effect of cognitive legitimacy on any authenticity dimension diverges from source-credibility research, where expertise- and knowledge-based (i.e., cognitive) cues are reported as primary drivers of influencer evaluation (e.g., Wang & Huang, 2023). A plausible explanation is that, unlike discrete credibility judgements, cognitive legitimacy requires effortful, information-intensive processing that followers tend to bypass in favour of more accessible moral and pragmatic heuristics (Ryu & Jun, 2023).

Second, our finding that only honesty and uniqueness increase consumer engagement aligns with Shen (2021), who also reported significant effects of sincerity and uniqueness for micro-influencers. However, it contrasts with Kumar et al. (2022), where visibility—rather than uniqueness—was decisive, and with Wang and Huang (2023), who emphasized expertise. This divergence is consistent with our interpretation that the salient authenticity attribute depends on sample composition, cultural context, and influencer category.

Third, the strong engagement–purchase intention path ($\beta = 0.693$) is consistent in both direction and magnitude with Prentice et al. (2019) and Brodie et al. (2013), reinforcing the positioning of engagement as a proximal antecedent of purchase behavior rather than a parallel outcome. Taken together, these comparisons indicate that the contribution of the present model lies less in any single path than in specifying the normative (legitimacy-based) conditions under which particular authenticity attributes become behaviorally consequential.

Results related to mediation effects, Chen, Lin, et al. (2021) found that consumer interaction was associated with parasocial identification, attitudes towards the brand, and trust in the brand. Kim et al. (2021) found that consumer interaction was associated with brand loyalty and parasocial interaction. Nah (2022) found that perceived authenticity was associated with self-disclosure and message acceptance, Ren et al. (2023) between perceived authenticity, influencer types and purchase intention, and, Shoenberger and Kim (2023) between perceived authenticity, homophily type and purchase intention. According to our results, truthfulness has a significant mediating effect between moral and pragmatic legitimacy and consumer interaction, whereas uniqueness has a significant mediating effect only between moral legitimacy and consumer interaction. According to the other mediation effect results, consumer engagement seems to have a mediating effect between the authenticity criteria of truthfulness and uniqueness and purchase intention. In terms of causal relationships between variables and mediation analyses, companies should focus on truthfulness and uniqueness in terms of authenticity attributes and consider that these two attributes enable consumer engagement.

In terms of the relationship between authenticity factors and legitimacy and the overall model, the following evaluations can be made: Molleda (2010) argues that understanding authenticity is possible through insights from multiple disciplines, which can be achieved by developing approaches to complex social dynamics and segmented audiences, and that authenticity is influenced by organizational actions and stakeholder interactions. Arnesson (2022) revealed that emotional interactions with influencers create a perceived intimacy, which complicates the concept of authenticity, and followers feel a sense of betrayal when the influencer's behavior contradicts the values that followers perceive. Wellman et al. (2020) state that there is no official code of ethics for influencers and Miguel et al. (2022) mentions that some artificial interactions and manipulations raise ethical concerns about "interaction

authenticity". Beverland and Farrelly (2010) argue that authenticity in consumption is co-constructed through interactions with consumer identity and broader cultural narratives. According to Beverland and Farrelly (2010), consumers seek authentic experiences to achieve personal mastery (control), develop relationships with others and communities (connections), or conform to moral standards (virtue).

This study contributes to this global body of evidence by demonstrating that the normative dimension of influencer evaluation operates through the lens of legitimacy. Consumers attribute genuine credibility to an influencer after evaluating whether their behavior is consistent with broader social values (moral legitimacy) and whether their content provides a practical, personally relevant benefit (pragmatic legitimacy). This finding aligns with the meta-analytic observation that social identity congruence (the perceived congruence between an influencer's values and a follower's values) is a particularly strong moderator of engagement outcomes, especially in collectivist and value-sensitive cultural environments (Pan et al., 2025). Within this sample, respondents' reliance on moral and pragmatic legitimacy rather than purely cognitive legitimacy as the basis for authenticity evaluations may reflect cultural norms that prioritize relational trust and community-level appropriateness and could be investigated in other countries that share these cultural norms.

Ryu and Jun (2023) emphasize that when evaluating the legitimacy of an entity, consumers often act on heuristic cues because the information that must be possessed has cognitively demanding characteristics. Based on Marion (2006) definition of "legitimacy" as the acceptance of marketers' behaviors by society and "legitimization" as the justification of these behaviors to maintain their accepted status, we believe that it is possible for influencers to maintain their accepted status through their authenticity by basing their authenticity on a legitimate principle. This is because, as Beverland and Farrelly (2010) argue, socio-cultural norms play an important role in shaping consumers' standards of authenticity, which in turn influence their evaluations of brands and consumption practices.

In this study, based on the framework of the perceived legitimacy of influencers used by Bora Semiz and Paylan (2023), we attempted to identify which legitimacy factors affect authenticity criteria. In this way, both the authenticity criteria of influencers will be framed with perceived (moral, cognitive, pragmatic) legitimacy in terms of social norms and values, and brands and companies will be able to improve their collaboration with influencers by analyzing the legitimate factors consumers perceive in terms of influencer authenticity. Table 6 shows that the R^2 values of perceived legitimacy factors explaining authenticity criteria, authenticity criteria explaining customer loyalty, and customer loyalty explaining purchase intention are weak and moderate according to Hair et al. (2011). These results are similar to those of Bora Semiz and Paylan (2023) in terms of model contributes to the results of Wellman et al. (2020) in terms of the conclusion that influencers should rely on an ethical framework regarding the effect of authenticity on content design. We believe that the observation of the effect of pragmatic and moral legitimacy on authenticity factors, but not the effect of cognitive legitimacy, may be due to the phenomenon stated by Ryu and Jun (2023). In other words, consumers rely on heuristic signals to assess influencer authenticity. This approach might be necessary because their cognitive assessment of influencers' legitimacy must undergo a rigorous evaluative process. Moreover, the intimacy and emotional interaction between the influencer and their followers, which Arnesson (2022) notes, may also complicate or obscure the concept of authenticity and its cognitive (rational) the relationship between perceived legitimacy, brand trust, and attitude towards the brand. The fact that legitimacy factors show a certain effect value (Q^2) in explaining the factors related to the authenticity of the influencer shows that cognitive, pragmatic, and moral legitimacy factors can be used to provide a legitimate basis for the

authenticity factors of influencers. In addition, it can be said that the significance of the research basis for consumers' perceptions.

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the influencer-marketing and consumer-behaviour literatures in four respects. First, to our knowledge, it is the first study to integrate Suchman's (1995) institutional legitimacy theory with the influencer-authenticity literature, thereby relocating influencer evaluation from the dominant source-credibility and parasocial-relationship paradigms to a normative, legitimacy-based account.

Second, by demonstrating that moral and pragmatic—rather than cognitive—legitimacy shape perceived authenticity, the study provides empirical support for the proposition that authenticity is not merely an individual trait but a socially negotiated perception anchored in shared norms (Chung et al., 2023; Wellman et al., 2020).

Third, it extends the influencer-specific legitimacy scale of Bora Semiz and Paylan (2023) previously linked only to brand trust and brand attitude—to the downstream constructs of authenticity, consumer engagement, and purchase intention, thereby articulating an integrated legitimacy–authenticity–engagement–intention chain that has not previously been modelled jointly. Fourth, by evidencing the primacy of moral and pragmatic legitimacy within a Turkish (collectivist, value-sensitive) setting, the study contributes culturally contextualised theory and specifies a boundary condition that invites cross-cultural replication (Pan et al., 2025).

Practical Implications

This research has numerous practical implications for firms that are contemplating a partnership with influencers. First, before collaborating with an influencer to promote a particular product, managers should seek their followers' perceptions of the influencer's legitimacy based on moral and pragmatic legitimacy. Testing these legitimacy factors through the integrity and uniqueness of the influencer is the best option for the influencer to collaborate with, given the research model.

Second, it shows that consumer engagement is also influenced by truthfulness and uniqueness. Executives should analyse a consumer's motivation to follow and engage with a particular influencer based on truthfulness and uniqueness and can better align their brand or product with the influencer based on these attributes. The fact that truthfulness and uniqueness have a mediating effect between moral and pragmatic legitimacy and consumer engagement, and that consumer engagement has a mediating effect between truthfulness and uniqueness and purchase intention, and that the research model yields significant results gives managers the opportunity to consider the research model.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several significant limitations to this investigation. Initially, the results' generalisability is restricted by the fact that the sample was selected using a non-probability sampling procedure. However, time and budget constraints and impossibilities seen in all research made it necessary to carry out this research in this way. In addition, because the data were obtained through convenience sampling, some demographic characteristics' concentrations limit the statistical representativeness of the sample for the broader population of social media users in Türkiye. Accordingly, the effects reported below should be interpreted as analytical rather than population-descriptive, and they should not be generalised to the

population without replication on a more demographically balanced and probability-based sample. Second, when measuring perceptions of legitimacy and authenticity, we did not set any limitations, such as brand, influencer category, or product category. We asked them to write down the names of the three influencers whose posts they followed the most at the beginning of the survey and to answer the other questions with these three influencers in mind. This may have led to a lack of a specific perception of legitimacy and authenticity in the respondents' minds when thinking about influencers in terms of authenticity and legitimacy factors. In this respect, preparing the model with a more solid and framed set (specific product, brand, influencer category, sponsored advertisement, etc.) of questions may provide managers and academics with different ideas and opportunities regarding the model's overall level of impact and significance. Third, a further limitation concerns measurement. Several authenticity sub-dimensions exhibited HTMT values above the conservative 0.85 threshold, and one dimension (sincerity) showed an inner-model VIF above the 5.0 reference value, signalling possible conceptual overlap and collinearity among closely related constructs. Subsequent studies should consider scale refinement or a second-order conceptualisation of influencer authenticity to strengthen discriminant validity.

Individuals desire consistent and precise self-assessments, and social comparison theory is one of the theoretical frameworks that facilitates this evaluation. Individuals approach influencers with a similar status to themselves with intimacy, while those they perceive as superior are approached with admiration, according to this theory (Kim et al., 2023). In this respect, we believe that testing the perceptions of the legitimacy of influencers in terms of social comparison theory will allow managers and academics to make interesting inferences.

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T.C
İZMİR BAKIRÇAY ÜNİVERSİTESİ
GİRİŞİMSSEL OLMAYAN KLİNİK ARAŞTIRMALARI ETİK KURULU
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ARAŞTIRMANIN AÇIK ADI	İnfluencerların Algılanan Meşruiyetinin Tüketici-Influencer Bağlılığına Etkisi ve Influencer Özgünlüğünün Aracılık Etkisi Üzerine Bir Araştırma			
KARAR	Karar No: 1287	Araştırma No: 1267	Tarih: 08.11.2023	
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Information About the Article/Makale Hakkında Bilgiler

The Ethical Rules for Research and Publication / Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği

The authors declared that the ethical rules for research and publication followed while preparing the article.

Yazarlar makale hazırlanırken araştırma ve yayın etiğine uyulduğunu beyan etmiştir.

Conflict of Interests/ Çıkar Çatışması

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Below are the question posed to the authors concerning the use of artificial intelligence in the preparation of the manuscript and the authors' response to that question.

Did you benefit in any way from generative artificial intelligence programs during the preparation, execution, data analysis, or any other stages of this article? Yes

If your answer is yes, please explain at which stage(s) you used generative artificial intelligence programs:

AI-assisted tools were used only for language editing and readability improvement. All scientific content, analysis, and conclusions are solely the work of the authors.