

The Impact of Influencer-Brand Congruence on Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention in Health Product Endorsements

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has transformed how consumers engage with brands, particularly through the growing influence of social media personalities. In health and wellness marketing, influencers are often selected based on their appearance, lifestyle, and perceived alignment with brand values. However, little empirical research has examined the specific role of visual-based congruence between influencers and health-related brands in shaping consumer trust and purchase intention. While prior studies highlight the importance of influencer credibility, the mechanisms by which visual congruence and parasocial identification affect consumer behavior remain underexplored.

This thesis explores: *To what extent does influencer-brand congruence impact consumer trust in health products and their purchase intention?* Drawing on social identification theory and parasocial interaction, the study hypothesizes that higher influencer-brand congruence will lead to greater trust and intention to purchase, and that this relationship is mediated by the consumer's emotional connection and how they identify with the influencer.

To test this, a between-subjects experimental design was conducted with 165 participants who were randomly assigned to view either a high-congruence, low-congruence or neutral influencer-brand pairing. Participants completed a structured online survey measuring influencer credibility, trust, parasocial relationship, aspirational identification, and purchase intention. The data was analyzed using ANOVA and mediation analysis with PROCESS macro.

The results of the study revealed no statistically significant direct effects of influencer-brand congruence on consumer trust or purchase intention, as indicated by ANOVA and regression analyses. Similarly, parasocial relationship did not significantly mediate the relationship between congruence and either trust or purchase intention, suggesting that emotional familiarity alone was insufficient to drive these outcomes in the tested context. However, the analysis revealed that aspirational identification significantly mediated the relationship between influencer-brand congruence and both consumer trust and purchase intention.

These findings suggest that aspirational identification, rather than congruence or parasocial ties alone, plays a crucial role in building trust and purchase intention. Marketers should prioritize influencers who evoke aspirational appeal to enhance campaign effectiveness in the health sector.

KEYWORDS: *Influencer marketing; Brand congruence; Consumer Trust; Purchase intention; Parasocial relationships*

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1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is a rapidly developing field of research, reflecting both the growing presence of social media in consumers' lives and the significant role influencers play in shaping consumer perceptions and decision-making (Spörl-Wang et al., 2024, p. 2). Brands now recognize that partnering with influencers enables more authentic and persuasive connections with their audiences, leveraging influencer credibility, relatability, and perceived expertise to drive brand value and influence purchasing behavior (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 579). Success in this domain relies increasingly on the ability of brands and influencers to anticipate and embody trends and aesthetics that resonate with viewers (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 2; Shan et al., 2020, p. 590). An influencer is “an individual who has accrued a sizable and engaged following on one or more social media platforms, and who possesses the power to shape attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of their audience through their online content” (Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 2). Influencers derive their power from perceived expertise, authenticity, and social connection, often functioning as ‘micro-celebrities’ rather than traditional celebrities and playing a critical role for brands looking to leverage a closer relationship with its consumers.

A prominent example of this dynamic is the rise of the “it-girl” lifestyle trend, highly visible on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This trend refers to young women who captivate public attention through a unique combination of authenticity, personal style and an aesthetic energy, with icons like Paris Hilton in 2000s (Lissner, 2022, p. 19). In the digital age, the it-girl has evolved into influencers who curate highly controlled, often idealized online personas. Today, the influencer it-girl is clean (no heavy make-up), goes to the gym and Pilates, eats healthy and journals. Influencers project carefully curated images of wellness, nutrition, and fitness, and often blend aspirational lifestyle narratives with product endorsements (Lissner, 2022, p. 1; Vázquez-Atochero & Romero-Sanz, 2025, p. 1). This social media construction of wellness and aspirational living is not only widely consumed but has also become a central marketing strategy for health and wellness brands. Theories of gender construction and body image, such as those articulated by Connell (1987, 1995) and Butler (1990), provide a critical lens for understanding how influencer content both reinforces and challenges normative body ideals. The commercialization and sexualization of female fitness, as well as the ongoing negotiation of femininity and strength, shape both how influencer content is produced and how it is received and interpreted by consumers (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013, p. 6). When an influencer's physical appearance and lifestyle align with the advertised health product, consumers are more likely to perceive the recommendation as authentic and credible (Martínez-López et al., 2020, pp. 585-586). Nonetheless, this congruence can reinforce potentially harmful beauty standards, creating a complex dynamic for brands and influencers as they navigate pressures between trust-building fit ideals and the risk of perpetuating problematic norms (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 7). These brands, in turn, capitalize on influencers' credibility, attractiveness, and specialized expertise to foster trust and drive purchase intention (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Martínez-

López et al., 2020, p. 585). By engaging fitness or wellness influencers who visually and narratively signal "ideal" health, brands maximize their persuasive impact among audiences striving for similar goals (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 7).

1.2 Influencer-Brand Congruence and its Role in Marketing

Despite the importance of this strategy, the extent to which congruence between an influencer's body image (e.g., physical appearance, "fit" body type, or perceived "healthy look") and a brand's identity influences consumer attitudes and purchase intentions remains underexplored (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590; Weinlich & Semerádová, 2024, p. 7). Research shows that broader congruence, such as the match between an influencer's values, style, and overall person with a brand's identity, is a key determinant of credibility and trust (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020, p. 260; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 590). By contrast, the specific impact of body image congruence in influencer marketing contexts deserves further attention. Most studies have not isolated the unique effects of visual/body image congruence, especially in the context of health and wellness. This is a significant gap, as current digital marketing relies heavily on visual cues and social comparison processes (Vázquez-Atochero & Romero-Sanz, 2025, p. 1; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 601). Highly visual platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube encourage users to evaluate their bodies, lifestyles, and consumption habits against idealized portrayals from influencers, intensifying pressures to conform to aspirational consumption. As a result, marketing strategies that do not account for the impact of influencer appearance and the mechanisms of social comparison risk reinforcing unrealistic standards.

1.3 Cultural Shifts

Cultural shifts are emphasizing inclusivity, social justice, and "woke" culture have redefined what audiences expect from brands and influencers (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 3; Sobande, 2019, p. 130). Audiences now look for influencers and brands that not only embrace diversity and speak out against social inequities but also demonstrate accountability and genuine commitment to these causes in both messaging and business practices. The drive for representation and authenticity has placed new pressures on both industries to balance aspirational marketing with calls for diversity and realness. This leads to critical questions about the social consequences of visual marketing and who gets to embody wellness, beauty, and success (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 7; Vázquez-Atochero & Romero-Sanz, 2025, p. 7). Although not always captured in academic terminology, "woke culture" is increasingly referenced in scholarship as a driver of consumer preference for inclusive and socially responsible marketing (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 3; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 595). While much is known about the general effectiveness of influencer marketing, there remains a critical gap regarding its nuanced implications within health and wellness, particularly as they pertain to body image congruence and consumer trust. Most research focuses on broad constructs, such as influencer credibility or brand-influencer alignment, without disentangling the

influence of visual congruence, especially the match between an influencer's physical appearance and the product's promised outcomes (Li & Peng, 2021, p. 130). Recent studies show that influencer-brand congruence can amplify trust, engagement, and purchase intention among consumers when the influencer's appearance, lifestyle, and persona align with the brand or product (Shan et al., 2020, pp. 606-607; Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020, pp. 585-590; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 15; Han & Balabanis, 2024, pp. 419-421). Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982, pp. 287-288) and Parasocial relationship frameworks (Horton & Wohl, 1956, pp. 215-219) suggest that similarity and emotional connection with an influencer justify seeing their endorsements as authentic, making recommendations feel like personal advice (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 5). Given that influencer content has measurable impacts on body image perceptions, mental well-being, and aspirational identification, especially among young and health-motivated audiences (Shan et al., 2020, p. 592; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 2), a deeper understanding of these dynamics is needed. This is especially important because health and lifestyle influences often promotes thin, conventionally attractive body types. Such portrayals can unintentionally marginalize individuals who do not fit these ideals, potentially causing dissatisfaction and harmful behaviours, especially among vulnerable groups. As health influencers increasingly endorse a wide range of products, concerns about transparency and authenticity grow (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 6). Consumers are exposed to a mix of explicit promotions and subtler, less obvious advertising, making it crucial to examine the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies.

Unpacking how influencer-brand body image congruence operates, within the broader context of societal values and consumer trust processes, is essential for optimizing brand-influencer partnerships and advancing both marketing effectiveness and social responsibility (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 7; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 595; Vázquez-Atochero & Romero-Sanz, 2025, p. 7). Additionally, addressing ethical concerns discussed above is vital not only for consumer protection but also to promote healthier, more inclusive standards in digital health communication. Prior research shows that products associated with aspirational goals, such as health and self-improvement, enhance consumer engagement and trust when endorsed by congruent sources (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 211; Jin & Phua, 2014, p. 75). However, much of the existing literature has focused on either traditional endorsement or general consumables, revealing a research gap in real-world, non-campaign health products that are aspirational yet controversial, such as dietary supplements. Additionally, previous studies have explored influencer credibility, authenticity, and engagement (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603), there is a gap in understanding how body image congruence interacts with trust and purchase intentions in health-related endorsements. Understanding the interaction between influencer credibility, perceived congruence, and societal values is essential for optimizing brand-influencer partnerships. Nonetheless, understanding this interaction goes beyond filling a research gap. In the health and wellness sector, consumers decisions are strongly influenced by social comparison and visual cues. Influencers serve as role models, and their physical congruence with

brand promises and goals can reinforce perceived efficacy and desirability of product (Martinez-Lopez et al. 2020, p. 585). Understanding the mechanism by which visual congruence amplifies trust clarifies how aspirational identification and perceived authenticity affect real health choices, especially in domains where purchase decisions can have direct implications for physical and mental well-being (Cooper et al., 2024, p. 12; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 8).

The proposed research question is: *To what extent does influencer-brand congruence impact consumer trust in health products and their purchase intention?*

1.4 Relevance

The growing focus on health and wellness in consumer culture makes this study highly relevant. Influencers promoting health products often present an idealized body image that may shape public perceptions of health and fitness (Cooper et al., 2024, p. 12). This can impact audiences, especially young consumers, therefore understanding the impact of such promotions on their psychological well-being is very important (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 8). It is significant to understand how viewers interact with health influencers as it can help brands to make more ethical decisions when selecting partnerships and messaging. Generally, the relevance is multifaceted. Understanding the effects of influencer-brand congruence not only enhances critical thinking but also empowers consumers to make more informed and autonomous purchasing decisions. When consumers are able to identify persuasive strategies used in influencer marketing, they are more likely to base their choices on their personal preference and not trends (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017, p. 799). For influencers, it encourages reflection on how collaborations and messaging resonate with social values. For policymakers, it underscores the possible need for regulations on responsible promotion of such products. With the rise of body positivity movements and inclusivity demands, brands face a paradox: Should they align with conventionally “fit” influencers, potentially reinforcing narrow beauty standards? Or should they embrace diverse body representations, even if it challenges consumer expectations? This study will offer insights into how congruence, based on perceived body type and influencer expertise, shapes consumer trust and ethical considerations in marketing.

Academically, this study aims to address the research gap: role of body image congruence in trust formation and purchase intentions. Previous studies have examined influencer credibility, emphasizing characteristics such as authenticity, attractiveness, and expertise (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131). Studies have shown that high perceived credibility generate greater engagement and positive attitudes among consumers (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585). Furthermore, the concept of self-influencer congruence has been explored, indicating that consumers feel stronger identification with influencers who align with their self-image and values (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). Studies on consumer-brand congruence suggest that when a brand's identity aligns with an influencer's image, the persuasive impact on consumers is significantly amplified (Ceylan & Hayran,

2025, p. 7). However, existing research has not thoroughly examined the intersection of body image congruence and its direct influence on consumer trust and purchase intentions in the health and wellness sector.

2. Theoretical Framework

The intersection of influencer marketing, body type/image, and consumer trust has become a focal point in contemporary consumer culture, particularly within the health and wellness sector (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 1–2; Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2020, p. 589–590; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020, p. 260). As social media influencers increasingly shape public perceptions of health, fitness, lifestyle, and body ideals, their endorsements raise important ethical and psychological concerns that deserve careful academic attention (Cooper et al., 2024, p. 2; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 1). This section aims to expand on the theoretical framework investigating how influencer-brand congruence – especially relating to body image – affects consumer trust and purchase intentions.

This study is grounded in Social Identification Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40), Aspirational Theory (Bandura, 1986, pp. 22-28), and Source Credibility Theory (Hovland, et al., 1953, pp. 21-22). It integrates key mediators, including parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956, pp. 215-219) and aspirational identification (Bandura, 1986, pp. 22-28), which are crucial for understanding how consumers relate to influencers and brands.

2.1 Influencer-Brand Congruence & Social Identification Theory

Influencer-brand congruence refers to the degree of alignment between an influencer’s personal brand (image, values, expertise, lifestyle, body type) and the brand or product being promoted (Weinlich & Semerádová, 2024, p. 15). High congruence makes endorsements seem more authentic and trustworthy to followers, signalling that the influencer genuinely believes in or uses the product (p. 1). The authors present three types of congruence:

1. Value/Personality congruence: This is when the influencer’s values, personality traits, or worldview are similar to those promoted by the brand. For instance, a sustainability-focused influencer endorsing an eco-friendly product reinforces perceived alignment.
2. Aesthetic/appearance congruence: This is when the visual and stylistic match between the influencer and the brand, such as a fitness influencer with a “fit” body endorsing activewear, or a minimalist influencer promoting a minimalist product line (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 9; Bao et al., 2024, p. 7).
3. Expertise congruence: This is when the influencers is widely recognized as knowledgeable or experienced within the brand’s product category (e.g., a nutritionist

recommending supplements), demonstrating expertise (Weinlich & Semeradova, 2024, p. 2; Feng et al., 2021, p. 978).

Several factors can foster congruence between an influencer and a brand or product (Weinlich & Semeradova, 2024, p. 2; Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 5). Influencer-brand congruence serves as a key component of source credibility, as it signals expertise and authenticity. In this study, the focus is on visual cues given by the body type of a particular influencer. This relates to the alignment between the physical appearance or body type of the influencer and the idealized body image associated with a product or brand, often leading audiences to associate product efficacy with achieving similar results (Cooper et al., 2024, p. 2; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 4). This congruence is quite important in the health and wellness marketing realm as it usually propagates a “fit ideal” (muscular, thin, toned body as the standard of health and attractiveness).

Congruity Theory (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955, p. 42) proposes that the effectiveness of persuasive communication relies heavily on how well the source (in this case influencer) and the object (e.g., brand or product) are perceived to fit together (Han & Balabanis, 2023, pp. 298-299). When congruity is high, consumers are more likely to accept the message, form favorable attitudes toward both the influencer and the product, and demonstrate increased intent to engage or purchase. On the other hand, lack of congruity can trigger negative evaluations, skepticism, and resistance to persuasion, as the endorsement appears unnatural or commercially motivated (Shan et al., 2020, p. 592; Martínez-López et al., 2020, pp. 585–586).

Social Identification Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40) explains that individuals categorize themselves and others into groups. Forming social identities that influence their attitudes and behaviors. By being able to relate and identify with an influencer, consumers are more likely to trust and adopt the behaviors endorsed by that influencer. In the context of influencer marketing, congruence facilitates this social identification process. For example, when a consumer perceives high congruence between an influencer and a product and sees similarities between themselves and the influencer (e.g., shared values, appearance, or lifestyle), it strengthens the psychological bond known as identification (Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 398; Yan et al., 2020; p. 595). This perceived similarity and group alignment lead consumers to regard the influencer as part of their “in-group,” boosting trust and making them more receptive to the influencer’s recommendations (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 261). Ultimately, congruence operates as a bridge between brand positioning and in-group social dynamics, explaining why consumers are more likely to trust, relate to, and emulate influencers whose persona aligns with both the brand and their own social identity.

Congruence and congruity theory explain why the degree of fit between an influencer and a product or brand matters: it increases the authenticity, trustworthiness, and persuasive power of endorsements. Social Identification Theory adds that this effect is amplified when consumers can

identify with the influencer, leading to greater trust and a stronger likelihood of adopting the endorsed behaviors or products (Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 398; Schouten et al., 2020, p. 261; Weinlich & Semeradova, 2024, p. 2).

2.2 Influencer Credibility, Authenticity, Trust

Authenticity

Authenticity, in the context of influencer marketing, describes the extent to which an influencer is perceived as genuine, sincere, and true to themselves in their public persona and content (Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 4). Authentic influencers are seen as honest and consistent, sharing real experiences and personal opinions rather than simply promoting products for commercial gain (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585; Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419). Authenticity fosters emotional connection and is critical for building long-term trust between influencers and their audiences (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131).

Trust

Trust in influencer marketing refers to the confidence followers place in an influencer's honesty, reliability, and intentions. It reflects the belief that the influencer will provide accurate, unbiased information and acts in the best interest of their followers. Trust, often conceptualized in the literature as "trustworthiness", is a core component of source credibility and captures the degree to which an influencer is seen as sincere, honest, and dependable (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41; Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603).

Trust is an essential mediator that influences whether consumers accept recommendations and are willing to act on them, directly affecting purchase intentions and engagement (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131). This is because trust determined whether consumers will accept and act upon recommendations. According to Source Credibility Theory, trustworthiness is a critical component in shaping how persuasive a message will be (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41; Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419). When trust in an influencer is high, consumers are more likely to evaluate endorsements positively, which directly increases engagement and purchase intentions (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131).

Influencer Credibility

Influencer credibility refers to the overall perception that an influencer is a credible source of information about a product, service, or topic (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 2). Source credibility is typically conceptualized as a multidimensional construct made up of expertise (the influencer's perceived knowledge/competence), trustworthiness (the influencer's perceived honesty/reliability, i.e., trust), and sometimes attractiveness (the influencer's likability or appeal) (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). All of these dimensions collectively shape the influencer's persuasive power

and followers' attitudes and behaviors. Building on Ohanian's work, Han & Balabanis (2024, p. 419) extend and validate this model within the context of social media influencer marketing, providing empirical evidence that these dimensions collectively shape an influencer's persuasive impact and their followers' attitudes and behaviors. High source credibility, inclusive of trust, expertise, and attractiveness, increases the likelihood that consumers will accept recommendations and develop favorable brand attitudes because the influencer is seen as both competent and sincere (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585).

In the field of influencer marketing, source credibility plays a fundamental role in shaping consumer trust and behavior (Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 419; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). Research has consistently demonstrated that specific influencer characteristics, such as expertise, originality, and homophily (perceived similarity with followers), positively affect consumer attitudes and trust (Li & Peng, 2021, p. 961). In particular, homophily has been identified as a critical driver of trust, with consumers more readily trusting influencers who resemble them demographically or psychographically (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131). When influencers appear to authentically embody the products they endorse, they are perceived as more credible and genuine (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585). Thus, building consumer trust in influencer marketing is dependent on perceived authenticity, which is heightened by congruence between the influencer's image (e.g., body type) and the product category. It is fundamentally linked to the multidimensional construct of source credibility, which is heightened by congruence between the influencer's image and the product category.

2.3 Influencer-Brand Congruence and Consumer Trust

A prior study shows that the stronger the social identification with an influencer, the higher the trust and purchase intent (Reed et al., 2012, p. 314). When an influencer and a brand are perceived as congruent, consumers are more likely to trust the endorsement (Shan et al., 2020; Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131). Congruence serves as a heuristic cue, signaling that the influencer genuinely uses and believes in the product, thereby increasing authenticity. This framework is particularly relevant to influencer marketing, where audiences form identity-based connections with influencers and parasocial relationships. These are crucial for building trust and meaningful relationships. Moreover, the concept of in-group favoritism suggests that individuals perceive influencers who resemble them as more trustworthy and credible (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585). In this context, influencer-brand congruence may reinforce social identity, leading to increased consumer trust and engagement. Shan et al. (2020, p. 585) demonstrated that when consumers perceive self-congruence with an influencer, they are more likely to form parasocial relationships, leading to increased engagement and purchase intention.

Building upon this, the match-up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985, p. 954) serves as a specific application of broader congruence theories within marketing literature. While congruence

theories emphasize the positive effects of perceived alignment or fit between an endorser and a brand across attributes such as values, image, expertise, or lifestyle, the match-up hypothesis provides a more focused lens. It argues that the effectiveness of an endorsement is maximized when there is a meaningful match between particular characteristics of the endorser (e.g., expertise, attractiveness) and the product category (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 260; Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 401). For example, a credible fitness influencer endorsing athletic wear is likely to generate stronger consumer trust and purchase intention than if the same influencer endorsed an unrelated product. Especially in health and fitness contexts, congruence between an influencer's body type and the health product's promise acts as a credibility heuristic, a 'shortcut' that signals the influencer's authenticity and expertise. Thus, the match-up hypothesis complements the broader congruence perspective by identifying specific domains where endorser-product fit is especially critical to consumer response, reinforcing the notion that alignment, whether general or specific, underpins effective influencer marketing outcomes (Shan et al., 2020, p. 600).

When an influencer embodies characteristics that align with a consumer's identity or aspirational self, the consumer perceives them as part of their in-group, leading to greater trust. For instance, a fitness influencer promoting a protein supplement aligns with the consumer's expectations about who should be endorsing such a product. Conversely, if the same influencer were to promote an unrelated product (e.g., fast food), the perceived lack of fit would raise skepticism and reduce trust. Influencer-brand congruence has been found to significantly strengthen consumer trust by signaling that the influencer genuinely believes in and uses the promoted product (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590). In contrast, perceived incongruence, can induce skepticism and reduce trust (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 271).

H1: Consumers exposed to congruent influencer-brand pairing will report higher trust in the health product compared to those exposed to an incongruent pairing.

For this research the congruence will be between influencers' appearance, i.e., body type and what is socially considered skinny, muscular, and healthy versus a considered "unhealthy", toned and fatter body. Congruence enhances credibility and authenticity, which are essential for building trust in influencer endorsements. If an influencer's personal brand and physical appearance align with the product, consumers are more likely to perceive the recommendation as genuine. As argued by Shan et al. (2020, p. 590) trust increases when consumer perceive congruence between endorsed product and influencer, as this enhances authenticity.

Consumers rely on visual heuristics to assess credibility. Studies show that when influencers visually align with a product, they are perceived as more knowledgeable (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 601). However, congruence may also reinforce unrealistic beauty standards (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko,

2019, p. 7). Thus, consumer trust might differ depending on how aligned they are with societal body ideals.

2.4 Influencer-Brand Congruence and Purchase Intentions

While building trust is essential, it is equally important to examine how trust translates into consumer behavior. Research has demonstrated that trust serves as a crucial mediator between influencer characteristics and purchase intentions (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). Specifically, when consumers perceive an influencer as credible and trustworthy, consumers are more likely to act on influencer's endorsements. Influencer-brand congruence enhances this process by strengthening the consumer's self-brand connection, the degree to which consumers feel a personal association with the brand through the influencer (Li & Peng, 2021, p. 962). In contrast, partnerships perceived as inauthentic or misaligned (e.g., a visibly unhealthy influencer promoting fitness supplements) tend to weaken trust and reduce purchase likelihood (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 586).

Moreover, trust is an important precursor to persuasion, but it does not necessarily translate directly into consumer action. The next step in the process is purchase intention which is the consumer's willingness to buy a product based on the influencer's recommendation. According to Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21), consumers are more likely to accept and act on information when it comes from a source they perceive as credible. In the context of influencer marketing, this means that when consumers trust an influencer, they are more inclined to consider the influencer's endorsements in their purchasing decisions (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). Prior research has demonstrated that trust in an influencer leads to higher purchase intention (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). However, trust alone does not fully determine purchase intention, but also the degree of congruence between the influencer and the product (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585; Li & Peng, 2021, p. 962). When consumers perceive a strong match, they assume that the influencer has experienced benefits of the product firsthand, reinforcing their purchase decision. When followers perceive inauthentic or misleading partnership it reduces their purchase intentions. This is because congruence not only signals expertise and relevance, but also helps consumers feel more confident in their purchase decision (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 601). Congruence assures followers that the influencer genuinely uses or understands the product, which makes the endorsement seem more trustworthy and the recommendation more persuasive. Research further suggests that, while consumers may generally trust influencers more than traditional experts, this trust is highly sensitive to perceptions of authenticity, when consumers sense that an endorsement lacks authenticity or fit, their likelihood of purchasing the endorsed product diminishes significantly (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 601; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585). Thus, perceived congruence between influencer and brand plays a pivotal role in directly shaping consumers' purchase intentions.

H2: Consumers exposed to a congruent influencer-brand pairing will report higher purchase intention for the health product compared to incongruent pairing.

2.5 Parasocial Relationships and Connection

Parasocial Relationships refer to the one-sided emotional connections consumers form with influencers (Lin & Lee, 2024, p. 6). These connections resemble real-life relationships, where consumers feel as if they know and trust the influencer, without need for direct interaction. Shan et al. (2020), argue that parasocial relationships amplify the effect of congruence on trust, as consumers internalize endorsements as personal recommendations. This suggests that the more frequently a consumer interacts with an influencer's content, the stronger their perceived bond becomes. Over time, these relationships mimic real-life friendships, leading consumers to internalize the influencer's opinions and recommendations as if they were personal advice (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). This deepening of relationship occurs because the more frequently a consumer engages with an influencer's content, the greater their perceived bond and the more likely they are to internalize the endorser's messages as genuine and personally directed (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). Importantly, when an influencer's lifestyle, values, or appearance closely match those of the consumer, this perceived similarity further deepens the parasocial bond. As a result, the connection extends beyond mere admiration or entertainment and becomes a foundation for trust and acceptance of the influencer's recommendations. In this way, alignment in lifestyle or values does not stand apart from the parasocial connection but actively reinforces it, making the influencer's endorsements feel more authentic and persuasive.

Beyond observable traits, emotional and psychological bonds also contribute significantly to the formation of consumer trust. Parasocial relationships are one-sided emotional connections that followers form with influencers. This relationship plays a critical mediating role. These relationships mimic real-world friendships, fostering trust even without direct interaction (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). Research has shown that parasocial bonds amplify the impact of influencer-brand congruence on trust (Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 401; Schouten et al., 2020, p. 260; Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). Consumers' perceptions of and relationships with influencers play a central role in shaping the level of trust they place in endorsed products. One important aspect is identification, which refers to the feeling of seeing oneself in the influencer or aspiring to be like them. When consumers identify more strongly with an influencer, they are more likely to trust not only the influencer but also the products that the influencer promotes (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 260; Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 401). As a result, identification with an influencer is expected to positively impact trust in the endorsed health product.

Additionally, the development of parasocial relationship, the one-sided emotional connections that followers form with influencers, serves to deepen this effect. Parasocial closeness

enhances the perception that endorsements are authentic and personally relevant, which further increases trust in the promoted product (Lin & Lee, 2024, p. 7; Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). The stronger the parasocial bond, the more likely consumers are to perceive the influencer's product recommendations as trustworthy personal advice rather than commercial messaging.

H3a: Consumers who perceive stronger identification with the influencer will report higher trust in the health product.

H3b: Consumers who perceive a stronger para-social relationship with the influencer will report higher trust in the health product.

Individuals are more likely to trust influencers with whom they personally identify with. This identification fosters a sense of connection, enhancing trust (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131). Since trust is central to influencer marketing, it is essential to understand how it develops. Parasocial relationships act as a bridge between influencer-brand congruence and consumer trust by reinforcing emotional closeness. For example, if a consumer frequently engages with an influencer's fitness content, they may feel a deep sense of connection. When that influencer endorses a health product, the consumer perceives the endorsement as a personal recommendation, increasing trust. Parasocial relationships foster emotional connections that enhance trust when congruence is perceived (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590).

H4: Parasocial relationships will mediate the positive relationship between influencer-brand congruence and consumer trust.

2.6 Aspirational Identification

Another key mechanism driving influencer effectiveness is aspirational identification. Rooted in Aspirational Theory (Bandura, 1986, p. 24), aspirational identification occurs when consumers view influencers as models of the ideal self they wish to achieve. This alignment between the consumer's ideal identity and the influencer's projected image deepens trust and increases receptiveness to endorsed products.

In the context of health and wellness, aspirational identification is particularly salient. Influencers often embody society's prevailing ideals of health, success, and attractiveness, thus becoming powerful motivators for followers. Ceylan and Hayran (2025, p. 7) found that consumers are more likely to trust and act on recommendations made by influencers who embody their aspirational goals. Similarly, Hudders and De Jans (2022, p. 134) demonstrated that aspirational attributes significantly enhance influencer credibility and persuasive power. However, the aspirational influence of health influencers is not without controversy. Many influencers promote a narrow ideal of health, like thinness and muscularity. These can reinforce unrealistic beauty

standards and impact psychological well-being (Cooper et al., 2024, p. 12; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 8).

Aspirational Theory explains how individuals are motivated by the desire to emulate admired figures (Bandura, 1986, pp. 25-28). In the context of influencer marketing, consumers often aspire to the lifestyles projected by influencers, leading to increased trust in their endorsements (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 134). Health and wellness influencers create aspirational images that drive consumer engagement and brand trust. This theory argues that consumers will be more likely to purchase products from brands that align with their aspirational goals and influencer persona. Empirical research supports the link between aspirational influence and consumer behavior. Studies have shown that aspirational attributes, such as perceived success, attractiveness, and lifestyle desirability, enhance an influencer's persuasive power (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 7). When an influencer aligns with a consumer's ideal self, they become a symbol of success. This drives consumers to trust their recommendations, as they believe that using the same products will help them achieve similar results. This is significant as it is where the advertisements of products come in, as a way to achieve that ideal self. Consumers are more likely to trust influencers who inspire them to achieve their goals and portray a lifestyle they want. Important to highlight, is that for the purpose of this study, it will be assumed based on societal pressures and norms that generally people associate health with a skinny body (Ceylan & Hayran 2025, p.7; Cooper et al. 2024, p. 134).

H5: Aspirational identification will mediate the positive relationship between influence-brand congruence and consumer trust.

2.7 Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention

Consumer trust serves as mediator, bridging influencer-brand congruence and purchase intentions. Trust ensures that consumers feel confident about a product's efficacy and safety, influencing purchase decisions. Source Credibility Theory (Hovland, et al., 1953, p. 22) explains that trust arises when consumers perceive the influencer as credible and reliable. Congruence enhances this perception, as it signals alignment between influencer's expertise and the product's purpose. The stronger the trust, the more likely consumers are to act on purchase intentions (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). This trust is crucial in the health product category due to the inherent risk associated with consuming these products. When trust is established, it reduces consumers uncertainty, fostering purchase intentions. For example, research on wellness endorsements found that congruence between an influencer's fitness level and the brand being promoted enhances credibility and purchase intent (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). Trust bridges the gap between congruence and purchase intention by reducing perceived risk consumers might have. It enhances confidence in the product, reducing skepticism (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603).

H6: Consumer trust will mediate the positive relationship between influencer-brand congruence and purchase intention.

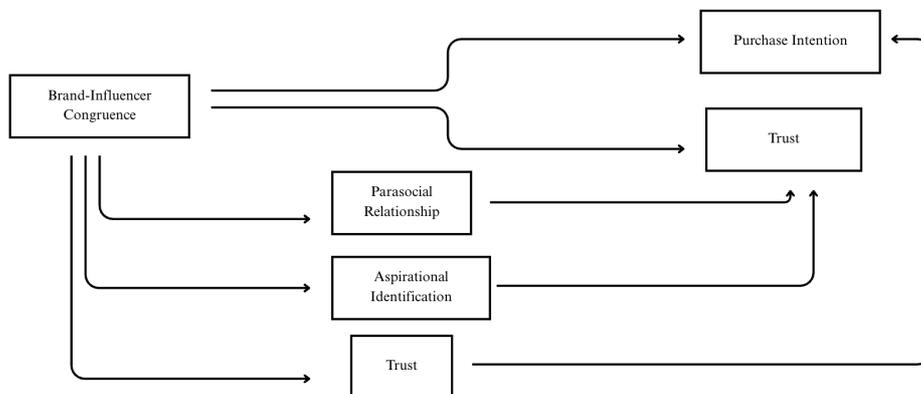
2.8 Conclusion

By drawing on social identification, aspirational, and source credibility theories, this framework highlights how influencer-brand congruence, especially through visible body image and lifestyle cues, plays a central role in fostering trust and driving purchase intentions within the health product sector (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 275; Han & Balabanis, 2023, pp. 419-424). This process is further shaped by emotional bonds, such as parasocial relationships, and aspirational identification, both of which are deeply influenced by social comparison dynamics and the widespread idealization of specific body types (Cooper et al., 2024, p. 2; Schouten et al., 2020, p. 270).

As discussed, prior research has established that congruence between an endorser and a product enhances perceptions of authenticity and credibility which are essential guiders of trust (Shan et al., 2020, p. 591). Similarly, trust has been shown to strongly predict purchase intention, particularly in the domain of health- and wellness-related products where perceived risk is high and trust functions as a decision-making heuristic (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Gefen et al., 2003, p. 54). The mediating variables are parasocial relationship and aspirational identification. When influencer-brand congruence is perceived to be high, it can intensify the parasocial bond, as the influencer appears more authentic and aligned with the viewer’s values (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590). This relationship, in turn, enhances trust in the endorsement, making parasocial relationships a key mediator between congruence and trust. Whereas aspirational identification refers to the extent to which consumers admire and wish to emulate an influencer’s lifestyle, appearance, or values. Congruent influencer-brand pairings make it easier for viewers to perceive the product as a pathway to achieving aspirational goals (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 134). This identification can increase the emotional relevance of the message, enhance trust, and ultimately drive purchase behavior.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Influencer–Brand Congruence, Mediators, and Purchase Intention



3. Methods

3.1 Design

To answer the research question, the paper will use a quantitative between-subject experimental survey design. This will investigate the effects of influencer-brand congruence on consumer trust and purchase intention within the wellness supplementation sector. This research employs a 3-level between-subjects experimental design to investigate the causal effect of influencer-brand congruence (levels: high, low, control) on two core consumer responses: trust and purchase intention. A quantitative, experimental approach was chosen as it can isolate and measure the causal effect of influencer-brand congruence in physical appearance on consumer trust and purchase intention within the wellness supplementation domain. This design allows for robust causal claims about the visual alignment in influencer marketing shapes consumer responses (Bryman, 2016, p. 205; Shan et al., 2020, p. 602). Experimental survey methodology is widely supported for studying social media and influencer effects, providing greater internal validity than qualitative or cross-sectional methods, and minimizing researcher bias and common method error while enabling the application of established measurement scales (Bryman, 2016, p. 205; Shan et al., 2020, p. 602).

Quantitative approach is grounded in the objective to quantify relationships between variables and generalize findings across populations. Additionally, it facilitates the measurement of data numerically, allowing for statistical analysis and objective interpretation (Babbie, 2020, p. 90). It also enables the identification of patterns and relationships among variables. An experimental survey design allows for the control of variables while examining the causal relationship between influencer-brand congruence and consumer trust (Shan et al., 2020, p. 602). This method enhances internal validity by enabling the manipulation of independent variables while maintaining control over other factors. Compared to qualitative methods, an experimental survey ensures higher reliability and reduces researcher bias (Bryman, 2016, p. 205). This is due to its ability to collect data from a broad audience. Thus, a quantitative experimental survey is the most fitting method for this study because it enables direct manipulation of influencer appearance to test its causal impact on consumer trust and purchase intention.

A between-subjects design is particularly well-suited for influencer marketing research because real-world consumer decisions are often made in a single exposure to an advertisement rather than through repeated exposures across different conditions (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). Furthermore, this design mimics naturalistic online behaviour, where individuals are typically exposed to only one type of influencer-brand pairing at a time (Shan et al., 2020, p. 602). Given that this research investigates the effects of congruence in terms of visual body alignment, on consumer trust and purchase intention, it is crucial that participants view only one stimulus to avoid comparative bias. A between-subjects design means that each participant is randomly assigned to only one experimental condition, preventing carryover effects or response contamination that could occur if participants were exposed to multiple conditions (Field, 2018, p. 129). This design

strengthens ecological validity, as individuals scrolling through Instagram or TikTok are unlikely to see different versions of the same ad side-by-side (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603; Shan et al., 2020, p. 602). It also reduces the risk of carryover effects, hypothesis guessing, or response contamination, which are particularly problematic when measuring sensitive psychological constructs such as trust and aspirational identification (Field, 2018, p. 129; Orne, 1962, p. 781).

Moreover, a between-subjects design enhances the integrity of manipulated visual-symbolic variables, ensuring that the impact of physical congruence between influencer and product is not diluted or confused across conditions. This is especially important for assessing visual body image cues, which play a central role in how influencer credibility and product relevance are perceived. Finally, this design is in direct alignment with recent experimental studies in influencer marketing that have successfully employed similar setups to investigate effects on trust, message credibility, and behavioural intention (Schouten, et al., 2020, p. 258; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 590). The research model aims to test the main effect variables and moderators, according to relationships established by previous research (Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 401; Schouten et al., 2020, p. 260; Shan et al., 2020, p. 600). In this design, each participant is randomly assigned to see one version of the video stimulus taken from Instagram Reels:

High congruence: Fitness influencer with wellness product

Low congruence: Non-fitness influencer with same product

Neutral: Product ad only (no influencer)

3.2 Experiment Development

In order to examine the impact of influencer-brand congruence on consumer trust and purchase intention in the wellness product section, a between-experimental survey was designed and conducted. The procedure was developed by following the guidelines for experimental advertising research and questionnaire design outlined by Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017, pp. 20-25), ensuring scientific rigor and replicability.

3.3 Stimuli Selection

The selection of material of this study was chosen based on the variance of perceived alignment between influencer's traditional content and internet persona and wellness product being endorsed. Choosing the high-congruent pairing, was done by looking for a visibility fit and 'muscular' influencer who embodied a lifestyle associated with physical activity, wellness routines, and fitness culture. The influencer not only uses the product but whose visual representation of the expected outcome of using said product. Its physical appearance matches societal expectations of someone credible in the health supplement space. This alignment is expected to evoke higher perceptions of source credibility, authenticity, and expertise, thereby reinforcing the core construct of congruence (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590; Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419).

In contrast, low-congruence condition featured a non-fitness-oriented influencer. Her appearance, lifestyle cues, and content are not typically associated with fitness or wellness. This influencer discusses the same product and its benefits but does so without any personal alignment with health-focused behaviours or visual symbols of expertise in the domain, just by simply enjoying the product. This manipulation disrupts the perceived match between the endorser and the product category, thereby inducing incongruence.

The distinction between the two conditions is thus based not on the influencer's verbal messaging, which were both on benefits of using the product, but on the visual attributes and nonverbal alignment with the product.

The design and selection of experimental stimuli are fundamental to isolating and accurately testing the impact of key influencer marketing variables. Recent literature underscores the necessity for stimuli that are both realistic and aligned with experimental manipulations, ensuring ecological validity and robust measurement of consumer responses (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 587; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020, p. 265; Feng, Chen, & Kong, 2021, p. 978). Thus, in accordance with previous studies recommendation to use realistic, pre-tested advertising materials to maintain ecological validity, the advertisements used in the experiment were not custom created. Instead, existing influencer-brand content from publicly available sources (e.g., Instagram or mock-ups from Canva using real product packaging and influencer photos) were found with minimal alterations to ensure consistency across conditions. For high-congruence condition, video was selected in which influencer showcased markers of physical fitness (e.g., activewear, muscular physique) and narrative referencing wellness routines. For the low-congruence condition, videos were chosen in which influencers did not visually or contextually align with health or fitness, for example, lifestyle content creators without fitness-focused personas. Selection was also guided by ecological validity: content needed to reflect the authentic, user-generated style typical of Instagram Reels. Both videos were found by using search engine in TikTok and Instagram, using key words "Fitness influencer", "Bloom greens review", "Daily routine".

This approach was chosen as not only it reduces bias as participants may perceive artificial or overly polished ads as inauthentic which could compromise trust scores, but also increases authenticity and validity of stimuli. This is because participants are more familiar with existing advertising styles and formats on Instagram or TikTok.

All three videos were similar in length (between 10 sec and 25 seconds), aesthetic (casual, user-generated style), and platform format which helped to control for extraneous factors such as production value, platform familiarity, and brand presence. The product itself remained constant across conditions to ensure that any differences in perception were due to the influencer presence and messaging tone, not the product content.

While selecting the advertisement, the goal was to find similarities on how product was being advertised. Specifically, all videos highlighted the health-related benefits of the product (e.g.,

digestion support, energy boost), used informal, user-generated aesthetics common to Instagram and TikTok (e.g., selfie-style framing, natural lighting), and maintained a neutral, upbeat tone. This was to ensure content and thematic consistency across conditions, minimizing the variation caused by messaging and associate it more with visual cues. All three videos were selected or created to highlight the same health product: Bloom Greens, and to emphasize its connection to wellness and physical vitality. In particular, the two videos that feature an influencer on screen both include verbal discussion of the physical or digestive health benefits associated with using Bloom Greens. These discussions entail the overall benefits of the product and it being incorporated in their routines. The endorsements follow a wellness-oriented script that aligns with common themes in social media health marketing, ensuring that any differences in participant perception can be more confidently attributed to the visual-symbolic congruence of the endorser and not the messaging content itself.

The No Person video was neutral as no visual physical association could be done with benefits of the product. It featured the Bloom product in similar lighting and visual framing, reinforcing the health-related connotation without introducing narrative or personality-driven cues. By maintaining a consistent core message across all conditions, the study tried to mitigate potential variability in persuasive strength, message elaboration, and cognitive involvement.

3.4 Product Selection

The Bloom supplement was selected for this study due to its strong alignment with current trends in influencer-driven health and wellness promotion, particularly on platforms like Instagram where dietary supplements are frequently showcased by influencers as shortcuts to achieving idealized body shapes and well-being (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 1). This emphasis on influencer-product congruence, as highlighted by Martin-López et al. (2020, pp. 21–22), directly informed the design of this study by guiding the selection and manipulation of stimuli to reflect either a strong or weak alignment between the influencer's appearance and the wellness product. Specifically, the stimuli were created to mirror the type of congruent and incongruent pairings that Martin-López et al. (2020, p. 14) identify as influential in shaping consumer trust and perceived endorsement credibility. By operationalizing this theoretical insight into visually distinct conditions, one featuring a fitness-aligned influencer and one without fitness cues, the experiment tests whether such congruence enhances credibility in health-related advertising contexts. Bloom Greens was chosen as the product stimulus due to its clear alignment with wellness, health, and fitness aspirations, making it highly suitable for testing influencer-brand congruence effects. Bloom is a relatively new entrant (launched in 2019), yet it has rapidly established itself as a cultural touchstone among health-conscious Gen Z and Millennial consumers (Adler, 2024). Bloom's effectiveness in leveraging influencer marketing is reflected in its commercial success and social media reach: the company reportedly reached \$1 million in sales in a single day and works with over 500 social media creators, collectively generating more than 12 billion views across platforms (Hewitt, 2025). As of

June 2025, Bloom's official Instagram account (@bloomnu) continues to feature consistent influencer collaborations, with engagement levels averaging over 1,000 likes and 100+ comments per post (Instagram, 2025). These metrics confirm the brand's authentic presence in the influencer ecosystem, increasing the ecological validity of using Bloom as the focal product in the experiment. The Bloom supplement exemplifies this ethically charged area, where influencers' promotion can impact body image perceptions and psychological well-being among vulnerable audiences, something identified as increasingly significant yet underexplored in influencer marketing scholarship (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019, p. 1). Additionally, limited research has experimentally tested how body image congruence impacts consumer trust and purchase intentions specifically for health supplements, addressing a relevant gap (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, studying the Bloom supplement addresses this gap and allows for an investigation into both the persuasive techniques used and the broader societal implications of supplement endorsements on social media.

3.5 Pre-test and Survey Development

Before performing the main experiment, a pre-test or pilot study was conducted with 27 valid respondents to evaluate clarity of the material chosen and perceived manipulations of the experimental stimuli and survey questions. Survey was designed in Qualtrics. Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling on Instagram and WhatsApp. The main objective of the pre-test was to verify whether the visual stimuli (influencer-brand pairing) successfully communicated either high or low congruence as intent and whether participants interpreted the videos consistently.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions:

Condition 1: High influencer-brand congruence. This means a fitness and wellness influencer, advertising the product, explains the benefits of using it and how it fits into her routine.

Condition 2: Low influencer-brand congruence. In these conditions a non-fitness influencer is advertising the products, talking about the benefits and quality of the product, similarly to the first condition. Here the influencer is not relating the product to any particular fitness goals.

Condition 3: Control. No influencer-brand relationship depicted. In this condition, participants viewed a generic advertisement for the Green Supplement with no influencer on frame talking about the product. This ensured that the viewer did not associate the benefits of the product to the influencer, nor associate potential expertise levels to the add.

The pre-test aimed to ensure stimuli would be understood by respondents and check if any adjustments needed to be made. The survey contained three primary components: a congruence perception scale, a manipulation check, and basic demographic questions (*see Table 1*). The key construct under investigation, perceived influencer-brand congruence, was assessed using a single item adapted from prior literature: "The [Influencer/Video content] appearance was consistent with

the product being promoted.” Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590; Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419). To ensure that participants understood the stimuli as intended, a manipulation check followed immediately. Participants were asked to identify the type of content they viewed with the categorical item. This manipulation check provided a clear test of the visual intent behind each stimulus and ensured alignment between participant perception and condition assignment.

Table 1

Pretest Measure

Concept	Example Items	Scale/Answer Type
Perceived Influencer-Brand Congruence	“The [Influencer/Video content] appearance was consistent with the product being promoted.”	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
Manipulation Check	“Which of the following best describes the video you watched?”	Single-Choice Categorical (1. A fitness-oriented person actively promoting a health supplement; 2. A casual lifestyle video (e.g., “day in the life”); 3. A product video that did not feature any person)
Demographics	Gender, Age, Familiarity with Bloom Greens, Social Media Usage Time	Single-choice (Gender, Familiarity, Social Media Time) / Open-ended (Age)

3.6 Pre-Test Results and Sample Description

The sample ($N = 27$) with a mean age of $M = 24.22$ years old with $SD = 2.47$. All participants completed the survey in full. Participants reported spending, on average, 3.48 hours per day on social media ($SD = 1.08$), with a majority (55.6%) reporting between 1 and 2 hours of daily usage. 40.7% of participants indicated they were familiar with the health supplement brand “Bloom,” while 59.3% reported no prior familiarity. This supports the assumption that the brand is moderately

known but not overexposed, reducing potential bias in responses. In the main survey familiarity with the brand was measured as a continuous variable.

A key objective of the pre-test was to determine whether the three experimental video condition: fit influencer, non-fit influencer, and product-only (control), were accurately perceived by participants.

Table 2

Manipulation Check Results

Experimental Condition	Stimulus Identification	Percentage Correct
Fitness Influencer (Fit Condition)	Recognized video as featuring a fitness influencer	80.0%
Non-fitness influencer (Lifestyle Video)	Recognized video as casual lifestyle content	55.6%
No-person Condition (Product only video)	Recognized absence of influencer (product-only)	66.7%

Cross-tabulation results showed a clear alignment between the intended condition and participant perception to ensure stimuli correctly perceived by respondents.

The manipulation check confirmed that the experimental manipulation was generally effective. Most participants (80%) in the Fit condition correctly identified the video as featuring a fitness influencer. In the Neutral condition, 55.6% of participants correctly recognized the content as a casual lifestyle video, although 33.3% interpreted it as a product-only clip, indicating some ambiguity. In the No-Person condition, 66.7% of respondents correctly perceived the absence of an influencer, suggesting reasonable stimulus clarity. While a chi-square test confirmed a significant relationship between video condition and perceived video type ($\chi^2(4, N = 22) = 16.66, p = .002$), the dispersion of responses in the lower-congruence conditions indicates a limitation in question clarity. Responses during the pre-test suggested that the manipulation check question lacked sufficient descriptive clarity, as evidenced by misclassification in the low-congruence and control conditions. Specifically, only 55.6% correctly identified the lifestyle influencer video, and 66.7% recognized the no-person condition, indicating room for improved stimulus recognition. In response, the final survey included more detailed descriptors in the manipulation check options, in order to increase the likelihood of accurate stimulus identification.

3.7 Sampling Strategy

A total of 155 participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling approach. Participants were randomly divided into three groups: Fit ($N= 48$), No Fit ($N= 52$), and

Neutral ($N = 55$). Convenience sampling was implemented by sharing survey link on Instagram. This method is particularly effective for reaching a relevant population given Instagram's high user engagement rates (Etikan, 2016, p. 3). Convenience sampling facilitates the quick recruitment of participants that are actively on social media and have been exposed to influencer content. Prior studies in digital marketing and consumer behaviour research often rely on convenience sampling to collect data from social media users who actively engage with influencers and brand endorsements (Shan et al., 2020, p. 605; Babbie, 2020, p. 192; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2020, p. 258). By adding snowball sampling, respondents are encouraged to share survey link with their personal network. This is useful to broadening reach and including participants from diverse demographic groups who may not be directly accessible on initial recruitment.

The sample size was determined following guidelines from Cohen (1992, p. 156), who suggests that detecting medium effect sizes (*Cohen's $d = 0.5$*) requires at least 50 participants per group to achieve 80% statistical power at a 95% confidence level. With at least 50 participants per condition, assigned to three experimental conditions, the study will have sufficient statistical power to detect meaningful differences in consumer trust and purchase intention based on influencer-brand congruence (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601).

A total of 155 participants completed the survey. The sample included 61.9% women, 36.1% men, 1.3% non-binary participants, and 0.6% who preferred not to disclose their gender. The age of respondents ranged from 21 to 75 years ($M = 31.90$ and $SD = 13.34$). Regarding social media usage, the majority of participants reported spending a significant portion of their day online: 40.6% used social media between 1 and 2 hours per day, while 20.0% used it between 3 and 4 hours. Only 9% reported using it less than 30 minutes daily, indicating high overall digital engagement across the sample. Familiarity with the brand Bloom was low to moderate. A substantial portion of the sample (74.8%) reported no prior awareness of the brand. However, 25.2% indicated varying levels of familiarity, from slight to moderate, supporting the suitability of the sample for testing advertising stimuli involving Bloom Greens.

The conditions were evenly distributed using Qualtrics tool. Of the 155 participants, 31% were assigned the "Fit" condition, 35.5% neutral and 33.5% "No Fit" condition.

3.8 Operationalization of Constructs

Influencer-Brand Congruence

Influencer-brand congruence refers to the degree of perceived alignment between an influencer's persona, for example their lifestyle, expertise and values, and the health product they endorse. High congruence signals authenticity and credibility, while low congruence may trigger skepticism and mistrust from consumers (Shan et al, 2020, p. 590). Influencer-brand congruence can be associated with perceptions of influencer and brand personalities (Weinlich & Semerádová, 2024,

p. 7). As explained above, an experimental survey will be done in which participants will be randomly assigned one of the three conditions:

1. **Congruent Brand-Influencer:** Fitness influencer endorses a wellness supplement, visually supporting societal expectations of “fitness.” A congruent brand-influencer partnership occurs when the influencer aligns closely with the brand or product due to expertise, persona, or visual identity. In this case, a fitness influencer endorsing a wellness supplement matches societal expectations that a person deeply engaged in fitness is a credible source about wellness, nutrition, or supplementation
2. **Incongruent Brand-Influencer:** A non-fitness looking influencer endorsing the same product. An incongruent brand-influencer pairing occurs when an influencer’s persona, appearance, or expertise does not match the brand or product being endorsed. In the wellness supplement context, this could mean an influencer without visible markers of fitness, either through lack of fitness-related content, absence of a fit physique, or no demonstrated knowledge of exercise/nutrition, endorsing a supplement. This runs counter to societal expectations and can seem jarring or inauthentic to the audience, leading to scepticism or diminished persuasive impact (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 5; Lissner, 2022, p. 23; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 593). Societal expectations link physical appearance and demonstrate expertise with fitness and health products. When a non-fitness-looking influencer endorses a wellness supplement, it visually and cognitively disrupts the schema consumers hold regarding who should be promoting such products, increase suspicion, and reduce message effectiveness (Ceylan & Hayran, 2025, p. 3).
3. **Control group:** To account for baseline perceptions of the product without an influencer endorsement, participants were shown only the product advertisement without an influencer.

To verify that participants perceive the influencer’ congruence with product category, as intended, a Likert-scale (1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree) was used. The items were adapted from established congruence measurement tools used in previous influencer marketing and endorsement research (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 262; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). Specifically, the scale assessed the perceived fit between the influencer’s persona, including visual appearance, lifestyle portrayal, and domain expertise, and the wellness supplement being promoted. Example items included statements such as: “The influencer’s image fits well with the product,” This construct serves as manipulation check.

Factor analysis supported the unidimensionality of the five-item congruence scale ($KMO = .86$; $Bartlett's \chi^2(10) = 341.26, p < .001$). One factor was extracted, accounting for 65.34% of the variance, with all loadings ranging from .75 to .84. Communalities ranged from .56 to .71. Internal consistency was strong ($\alpha = .86$), supporting the use of a composite scale. The credibility scale (five

items) showed adequate internal reliability ($\alpha = .86$). Factor analysis yielded one component (*eigenvalue* = 3.18), explaining 63.55% of the variance. *KMO* = .79 and *Bartlett's test* was significant ($\chi^2(10) = 358.46, p < .001$). Factor loadings ranged from .74 to .84, with communalities between .55 and .70. These results supported the creation of a single congruence index.

Table 3

Exploratory Factor Analysis Results for Influencer–Brand Congruence Scale

Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Congruence Item 1	0.85	0.71
Congruence Item 2	0.78	0.61
Congruence Item 3	0.84	0.67
Congruence Item 4	0.75	0.56
Congruence Item 5	0.79	0.62
Eigenvalue	3.27	—
Variance Explained	65.34%	—
Cronbach's Alpha	.86	—
KMO	0.87	—
Bartlett's Test (χ^2)	341.26, $p < .001$	—

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention refers to the likelihood that consumers will buy the endorsed product after viewing the influencer's endorsement (Shan et al., 2020, p. 601). Measured via the 1-item, the scale used by Mirabi et al. (2015, p. 14690): *I would consider buying this product based on the video I saw.* Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). This question aims to capture the likelihood of purchasing after ad exposure.

Consumer Trust

Consumer trust in influencer marketing was assessed using Gefen, Karahanna and Straub's (2003, p. 56) scale (2 items, *Cronbach's alpha* = .86), evaluating credibility, honesty, and reliability of the influencer.

Exploratory factor analysis revealed that trust and credibility items loaded onto a single factor, as previous research has identified trust as a key component of source credibility in influencer marketing (Han & Balabanis, 2024, p. 419; Lee & Kim, 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585). Specifically, credibility, encompassing perceptions of honesty, expertise, and reliability, acts as a mental short cut that facilitates trust formation. This unified construct captures both perceived honesty and the reliability of the influencer and the product claims, consistent with integrated models of source credibility (Hovland et al., 1953, pp. 21-22; Gefen et al., 2003, p. 56). Exploratory factor

analysis supported the unidimensionality of the combined trust and credibility scale. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure was .78 and Bartlett’s test was significant ($\chi^2(15) = 635.10, p < .001$). One factor was extracted, explaining 63.55% of the variance. A composite variable (*Ctrus*) was computed by averaging all seven items, including Trust and Credibility items. This is consistent with integrated views of source credibility in the literature, which ties audience trust directly to perceived expertise and sincerity in persuasive communication (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21; Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419).

Table 4

Exploratory Factor Analysis Results for Credibility and Trust Scale

Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Trust Item 1	0.84	0.71
Trust Item 2	0.83	0.68
Credibility Item 1	0.81	0.64
Credibility Item 2	0.75	0.56
Credibility Item 3	0.84	0.70
Credibility Item 4	0.78	0.60
Credibility Item 5	0.79	0.63
Eigenvalue	4.47	—
Variance Explained	63.84%	—
Cronbach’s Alpha	0.89	—
KMO	0.83	—
Bartlett’s Test (χ^2)	358.46, $p < .001$	—

Parasocial Relationship

To measure Parasocial Relationship, Rubin and Perse’s (1987, p. 243) Parasocial Interaction Scale will be used. It is a 2-item measure used in media and influencer marketing research.

Cronbach’s alpha was .73.

Aspirational Identification

To measure this concept the 3-item Likert-scale by Jin and Phua (2014, p. 701) will be used.

The three aspirational items loaded strongly onto one factor ($KMO = .75$; $Bartlett's \chi^2(3) = 300.24, p < .001$), explaining 84.37% of the variance. Factor loadings ranged from .91 to .93.

Cronbach’s alpha was .91, indicating excellent reliability. These items were averaged to form the final construct.

3.9 Experiment Procedure

For the experimental survey, participants were recruited online via a convenience and snowball sampling approach and were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions using Qualtrics' built-in randomization logic. The initial outreach involved sharing the survey link via personal WhatsApp groups and Instagram stories, targeting peers and acquaintances within the researcher's social network. To extend the sample, participants were explicitly encouraged to forward the survey link to others within their own networks. This method aimed to maximize reach and demographic variability while maintaining feasibility within the time and resource constraints of the study (Bryman, 2016, p. 187). Each participant was exposed to one of three stimulus videos designed to manipulate perceived congruence between the product (Bloom Greens) and the content style (Fit Influencer, Neutral Lifestyle, or Product-Only video). To ensure minimum exposure, participants were required to view the stimulus video for at least 15 seconds before being allowed to proceed.

The survey structure followed the recommended flow for experimental advertising research proposed by Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017, p. 20-25), which organizes content to minimize bias and maximize internal validity. After an initial introduction and informed consent form, participants were presented with the video stimulus (the experimental manipulation). Immediately following exposure, participants answered questions measuring the independent variable: perceived influencer-brand congruence. Subsequently, a manipulation check was administered to ensure that participants correctly perceived the nature of the video they had been shown (i.e., fitness influencer, casual lifestyle video, or product-only presentation).

Participants then responded to items measuring two mediating constructs: parasocial relationship (with the influencer or content) and aspirational identification with the portrayed lifestyle or values. These mediators were included to explore indirect pathways linking the stimulus exposure to consumer outcomes. The dependent variables were assessed thereafter, focusing on consumer trust toward the product and purchase intention. Trust captured participants' belief in the credibility and safety of the product, while purchase intention measured behavioural willingness to buy or recommend Bloom Greens.

The final section of the survey collected sociodemographic information, including age, gender, frequency of social media use, and prior familiarity with the product. Familiarity and social media habits were included as potential control variables. All variables were measured using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). On average, participants took $M = 308.26$ seconds ($SD = 188.03$) to complete the survey, which corresponds to approximately 5 minutes and 8 seconds. To ensure that the survey items accurately reflected the experimental condition each participant was exposed to, piped text was used in the questionnaire. Specifically, references to either "influencer" or "video content" were dynamically inserted into the wording of perceived congruence and identification questions, depending on the video stimulus shown. This

approach enhanced response validity by maintaining semantic consistency between the stimulus material and the survey items.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Data collection occurred over a 10-day period using convenience and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited via Instagram and WhatsApp using the researcher's personal network. Each participant was encouraged to share the link with others fitting the study criteria (healthy adults, social media users). This study adhered to ethical research standards in line with university guidelines. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to survey commencement. Participants were clearly informed about the nature and purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. No identifying information was collected. The study poses no physical or psychological harm to participants.

3.11 Validity and reliability

Ensuring both validity and reliability was a key concern in the design of this experimental study. Several steps were taken to maximize the robustness and generalizability of the data, while acknowledging limitations inherent to the research context and sampling method.

Reliability refers to the consistency and internal coherence of the measurement instruments. In this study, validated Likert scales were used to assess constructs such as influencer-brand congruence, trust, and purchase intention. Items were adapted from prior literature (Shan et al., 2020, p. 590; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603), and grouped logically by construct. A pretest ($N = 27$) was conducted to evaluate internal reliability using Cronbach's alpha, which showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.70$) across all multi-item scales.

Validity, particularly construct and internal validity, was addressed through careful design of the experimental manipulation. The video stimuli were chosen to represent clear distinctions in influencer-brand congruence, and the manipulation was pretested using a manipulation check question. A chi-square test confirmed that participants' perceptions significantly aligned with their assigned condition ($\chi^2(4) = 16.66, p = .002$), supporting the internal validity of the manipulation. Nonetheless, the use of existing advertisements rather than custom-produced videos presents a limitation. Although this improves ecological validity, replicating how participants typically encounter influencer content, it introduces some uncontrollable variation in delivery style, tone, and visual framing. These uncontrolled elements may serve as extraneous variables, reducing the experimental control necessary for strong causal inference.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Prior to analysis, all responses were screened for completeness, removal of preview/test cases, and manipulation check validity.

Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize participant demographics and overall variable distributions. To assess internal consistency, reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) was conducted for each of the key multi-item scales, including influencer-brand congruence, trust, and purchase intention.

For hypothesis testing, a series of one-way ANOVAs were performed to examine differences in dependent variables across the three video conditions (Fit, Neutral, No Person). Where significant effects are found, post-hoc Tukey tests will be used to identify specific group differences. Additionally, Pearson correlation coefficients was calculated to explore relationships between perceived congruence, trust, and purchase intention.

This statistical approach allows for both between-group comparisons and relational analysis of key constructs, offering insight into how symbolic congruence between influencer and product influences consumer response. Mediation analysis via PROCESS (Model 4) examined indirect and direct effects, with bootstrapping for confidence intervals (Hayes, 2013, p. 113).

5. Results

5.1 Manipulation Check

To assess whether the manipulation of influencer–brand congruence was perceived as intended, an ANOVA was conducted using the Congruence variable as the dependent measure of perceived congruence, and Condition (coded as 1 = Fit, 2 = No Fit, 3 = Neutral) as the independent variable representing experimental condition. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in perceived congruence across the three conditions, $F(2, 15) = 13.72, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$, suggesting that the manipulation was effective.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test showed that participants in the Fit condition ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.19$) reported significantly higher congruence perceptions than those in the No Fit ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.49$) and Neutral ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.36$) conditions. Levene's test indicated a marginal violation of homogeneity of variances, $F(2, 15) = 3.14, p = .046$. Though robust contrasts (based on trimmed mean and adjusted df) still supported the significance of group differences.

These findings confirm that participants accurately perceived differences in influencer–brand congruence as intended by the experimental design. Specifically, the Fit video condition was perceived as most aligned, while the No Fit condition was seen as least congruent. This pattern provides empirical support for the success of manipulation and validates the use of perceived congruence as a central construct in the study.

Additionally, a chi-square test of independence was conducted to assess whether participants correctly identified the video content based on their assigned condition. Results revealed a significant association between video condition and video description accuracy, $\chi^2(4), N = 154 = 114.50, p < .001$. Participants in the Fit condition primarily selected “A fitness-oriented person promoting a greens supplement” (66%), the NoFit group chose “A day in my life...” (76.9%), and the Neutral group identified the product-only video (74.5%). This pattern confirms that participants paid attention and perceived the video content in line with the experimental manipulation.

5.2 ANOVAs

To assess the effects of influencer-brand body image congruence on consumer responses, a series of one-way between-subjects ANOVAs were performed. The primary dependent variables were perceived credibility/trust in the health product and intention to purchase.

To test whether consumers exposed to a congruent influencer-brand pairing (Fit) reported higher trust in the product compared to those in an incongruent (No Fit) pairing (H1), a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of video condition on trust in the product. There was no statistically significant difference in Trust scores across the three video conditions, $F(2, 15) = 0.45, p = .639, \eta^2 = .01$.

For Hypothesis 2, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of influencer–brand pairing on consumers’ purchase intentions. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in purchase intentions across the three pairing conditions, $F(2, 15) = 0.25, p = .777, \eta^2 = .00$.

5.3 Linear Regression

To assess H3, two separate simple linear regressions were conducted to examine whether parasocial relationships and aspirational identification predict consumer trust in the health product. The first model tested parasocial relationships as the sole predictor. The regression was statistically significant, $F(1, 15) = 176.22, p < .001$, explaining 53.7% of the variance in trust (*Adjusted R*² = .53). Parasocial relationship significantly predicted trust ($B = .56, \beta = .73, p < .001$), indicating a strong positive relationship.

The second model tested aspirational identification as the predictor. This regression was also statistically significant, $F(1, 15) = 121.53, p < .001$, explaining 44.3% of the variance ($R^2 = .44, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .43$). Aspirational identification significantly predicted trust ($B = .51, \beta = .67, p < .001$), also indicating a strong positive relationship. These findings support H3 and demonstrate that both parasocial and aspirational identification significantly and positively influence consumers’ trust in the health product.

5.4 Mediation Relationship: Process

To evaluate H4, which hypothesized that parasocial relationship mediates the effect of influencer–brand congruence on consumer trust, PROCESS macro-Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) was used with multicategorical X coding. The three video conditions were dummy coded, using the Fit condition as the reference group. The analysis employed 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval.

Direct effects: The video condition did not significantly predict parasocial relationship for either the No Fit condition (X1: $B = -0.15, SE = 0.21, p = .457$) or the Neutral condition (X2: $B = -0.16, SE = 0.20, p = .444$). Similarly, the direct effects of both the No Fit ($B = -0.04, SE = 0.11, p = .694$) and Neutral ($B = -0.04, SE = 0.11, p = .712$) conditions on consumer trust were nonsignificant when controlling for parasocial relationship. The indirect effects of condition via parasocial relationship were not statistically significant:

X1 (No Fit vs. Fit): $B = -0.09, \text{BootSE} = 0.12, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.33, 0.15]$

X2 (Neutral vs. Fit): $B = -0.09, \text{BootSE} = 0.11, 95\% \text{ CI} [-0.31, 0.12]$

To complete the comparison set, the model was rerun with the Neutral condition as the reference group. This allowed examination of the contrast between the No-Fit and Neutral conditions. No significant effects were observed: the No-Fit condition did not significantly predict parasocial relationship compared to the Neutral condition (X2: $B = 0.00, SE = 0.20, p = .989$), nor

was there a significant direct effect on consumer trust ($B = -0.00$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .976$). The indirect effect via parasocial relationship was also nonsignificant, $B = 0.00$, $BootSE = 0.11$, 95% $CI [-0.22, 0.23]$.

As the confidence intervals for all indirect effects included zero, the mediation was not supported. The total effect of condition on consumer trust was also nonsignificant. These findings indicate that parasocial relationship did not mediate the effect of influencer–brand congruence on consumer trust. Thus, H4 was not supported.

To examine H5, which posited that aspirational identification mediates the relationship between influencer–brand congruence and consumer trust, a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022), with influencer-brand congruence treated as a multicategorical independent variable (Video condition) and the “Fit” condition as the reference group ($X=1$). The total effect of condition on consumer trust was not significant, $F(2, 15) = 0.45$, $p = .639$, indicating no overall difference in trust across the three video conditions, $R^2 = .01$. However, the mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects of condition on trust via aspirational identification. Specifically, participants in the No Fit condition ($X1$) reported significantly lower aspirational identification compared to those in the Fit condition, $B = -0.79$, $SE = 0.20$, $t = -4.01$, $p < .001$. Those in the Neutral condition ($X2$) also reported marginally lower identification, $B = -0.38$, $SE = 0.19$, $t = -1.97$, $p = .051$. In turn, aspirational identification significantly predicted consumer trust, $B = 0.55$, $SE = 0.05$, $t = 11.41$, $p < .001$, controlling for condition. Importantly, the indirect effects of condition on trust through aspirational identification were statistically significant:

No Fit vs. Fit: $B = -0.43$, $BootSE = 0.12$, 95% $CI [-0.66, -0.21]$

Neutral vs. Fit: $B = -0.21$, $BootSE = 0.10$, 95% $CI [-0.42, -0.00]$

To complete the comparison set, a second PROCESS analysis was run with the Neutral condition as the reference group. This revealed that participants in the No-Fit condition reported significantly lower aspirational identification compared to those in the Neutral condition, $B = -0.41$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .033$. The indirect effect of No-Fit vs. Neutral through aspirational identification was also significant, $B = -0.22$, $BootSE = 0.11$, 95% $CI [-0.45, -0.02]$, indicating that reduced identification in the No-Fit condition led to lower trust relative to the Neutral condition. Although the direct effect ($B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.11$) was marginally significant ($p = .054$), the presence of a significant indirect pathway further supports mediation.

Because the 95% confidence intervals for all contrasts did not include zero, these results confirm H5: aspirational identification significantly mediates the relationship between influencer–brand congruence and consumer trust.

To test H6, which posited that consumer trust mediates the effect of influencer–brand congruence on purchase intention, a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022), with a multicategorical independent variable representing the experimental conditions. Dummy coding was applied, with the Fit condition as the reference group (coded 1), and two contrasts: No Fit (X1) and Neutral (X2). The analysis used 5,000 bootstrap samples with a 95% confidence interval. The regression of the mediator (Congruence) on condition showed that both the No Fit condition (X1: $B = -1.28$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < .001$) and the Neutral condition (X2: $B = -1.18$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < .001$) significantly reduced perceived congruence compared to the Fit condition.

A follow-up analysis using the Neutral condition as the reference group revealed that No-Fit and Neutral did not significantly differ in perceived congruence ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .702$), nor in reported purchase intention ($B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .308$). The indirect effect through perceived congruence was also nonsignificant for this contrast: $B = -0.05$, $BootSE = 0.14$, 95% CI $[-0.33, 0.24]$, indicating no mediation between No-Fit and Neutral.

In contrast, both direct and indirect effects were significant for the Fit vs. No-Fit and Fit vs. Neutral comparisons. In the model predicting purchase intention, perceived congruence was a significant predictor ($B = 0.51$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater perceived congruence was associated with higher purchase intention. When including the mediator in the model, the direct effects of condition on purchase intention were also significant:

No-Fit vs. Fit: $B = 0.80$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .001$

Neutral vs. Fit: $B = 0.62$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .002$

The indirect effects through perceived congruence were significant:

No-Fit vs. Fit: $B = -0.66$, $BootSE = 0.16$, 95% CI $[-0.99, -0.36]$

Neutral vs. Fit: $B = -0.61$, $BootSE = 0.15$, 95% CI $[-0.92, -0.33]$

Because zero is not included in the confidence intervals, the mediation effect was supported. The presence of both significant direct and indirect effects suggests partial mediation. These findings confirm H6: Perceived congruence partially mediates the relationship between influencer–brand condition and purchase intention.

These mediation results collectively suggest a mediation-only pathway for both H5 and H6. In the case of aspirational identification, the significant indirect effects, despite a non-significant total effect, indicate that congruence influences trust primarily through aspirational identification. Similarly, for H6, both direct and indirect effects were significant, indicating partial mediation, but the strength of the indirect effect highlights that consumer trust serves as a key psychological mechanism linking perceived congruence with behavioural intention. This pattern supports the idea that congruence is not only about recognizing a logical fit, but it also acts as motivational trigger that influences how consumers think and feel. This ultimately shapes their responses through psychological mechanisms.

Table 5

Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hyp.	Tested Relationship	Method	Effect Type	Coefficient (B)	95% CI / p-value	Supported
H1	Video condition → Product Trust	One-way ANOVA	Main	F(2, 15) = 0.45	p = .639	No
H2	Video condition → Purchase Intention	One-way ANOVA	Main	F(2, 15) = 0.25	p = .777	No
H3a	Parasocial → Product Trust	Linear Regression	Total	B = .57	p < .001	Yes
H3b	Aspirational → Product Trust	Linear Regression	Total	B = .55	p < .001	Yes
H4	Congruence → Parasocial → Product Trust	PROCESS Model 4	Indirect	B = -0.09 to -0.09	95% CI [-0.33, 0.13]	No
H5	Congruence → Aspirational → Product Trust	PROCESS Model 4	Indirect	B = -0.43 (X1), -0.21 (X2)	95% CI [-0.67, 0.00]	-Yes
H5 (Neutral)	Congruence → Aspirational → Product Trust	PROCESS Model 4	Indirect	B = -0.22	95% CI [-0.45, 0.02]	-Yes
H6	Congruence → Trust → Purchase Intention	PROCESS Model 4	Indirect	B = -0.66 (X1), -0.61 (X2)	95% CI [-0.99, 0.33]	-Yes
H6 (Neutral)	Congruence → Trust → Purchase Intention	PROCESS Model 4	Indirect	B = -0.05	95% CI [-0.33, 0.24]	No

Note. Indirect effects were tested using 5,000 bootstrapped samples via PROCESS v4.2. Confidence intervals that do not include zero are considered statistically significant. X1 = No Fit vs Fit; X2 = Neutral vs Fit.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation: Role of Congruence through Identity and Trust

This study provides contributions to the understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness by investigating the complex role of perceived visual congruence between influencers and the brands they endorse, based on Social Identification Theory, Source Credibility Theory, Aspirational Identification. Surprisingly, and in contrast with Hypotheses 1 and 2, the experimental manipulation

of influencer-brand congruence, specifically the match between an influencer's body image and a promoted wellness supplement, did not generate significant direct effects on consumer trust or purchase intention. This stands in contrast to the literature discussed, which treated congruence or the perceived fit between endorser and product, as a determinant of effective marketing communication (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585; Shan et al., 2020, p. 590). The match-up hypothesis asserts that endorsements are most persuasive when there is a clear alignment between the spokesperson's salient attributes, such as appearance, lifestyle, or expertise, and the core attributes of the product category (Till & Busler, 2000, p. 1). The logic driving this framework is that consumers intuitively expect certain types of endorsers for specific products; when this alignment or 'match' is present, the endorsement feels natural and credible.

This expectation is especially significant within the health and wellness sector, where visible signs of fitness or specialized knowledge are not only advantageous, but often seen as prerequisites for delivering credible and convincing messages (Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419; Schouten et al., 2020, p. 261). Here, consumers tend to scrutinize the endorser's physical embodiment of wellness ideals or their professional expertise as cues of authenticity and product efficacy. Consequently, endorsements that exhibit strong congruence reinforce the notion that the influencer's advocacy is rooted in genuine experience and knowledge, thereby lessening resistance among audiences.

Research has consistently demonstrated that congruent influencer-product pairings foster perceptions of authenticity, increase trust in both the influencer and the brand, and ultimately lead to more favourable attitudes and stronger purchase intentions (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585; Schouten et al., 2020, p. 261). These findings underscore the practical significance of visible fit, not only as a mechanism for enhancing message effectiveness, but also as a pathway for building enduring consumer-brand relationships in increasingly competitive and image-driven markets.

Interestingly, the findings from this study, which relied on genuine, real-world influencer posts, suggest that just "looking the part", like having a fit appearance, may not be enough to guarantee trust or spark purchase intent among today's social media audiences (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). One possible reason for this is that, unlike past studies that used tightly scripted or staged influencer content, this research let participants interact with influencer posts as they naturally appear online, complete with all their usual variety in storytelling, personality, and tone (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603), making them more nuanced and less obvious. While this makes the results feel more relevant to real-life digital experiences, it might also mean that shallow cues like physical congruence become less noticeable or important. Instead, it appears that people may be looking for something more, like authenticity, genuine emotion, and a sense of transparency from influencers.

Additionally, the findings reveal that while direct effects of congruence were nonsignificant, congruence exerted an important indirect effect via psychological identification mechanisms. Specifically, this study revealed that aspirational identification played an important mediating role in determining trust. This suggests that how the influence's image aligns with the audience's

aspirational self, is also a determining factor to be considered. So, the consumer may be less influenced by whether an influencer looks right for the brand, and more by whether they embody a lifestyle or ideal that the consumer aspires to achieve.

Participants exposed to a fit (congruent) influencer developed stronger aspirational bonds, seeing the influencer as a model for health or success, which in turn predicted elevated trust in the featured product. This aligns with social learning and social comparison theories, where individuals internalize the success, lifestyle, or appearance of influencers as attainable ideals (Bandura, 2001, p. 267; Knoll & Matthes, 2017, p. 20). The results provide empirical backing for research that emphasizes aspirational identification beyond just expertise or physical resemblance as a key driver of influencer marketing effectiveness, particularly in sectors focused on health and aesthetics.

On the other hand, the expected mediation through parasocial identification didn't occur. While stronger parasocial bonds did predict greater trust, supporting *H3a*. These bonds weren't shaped by congruence manipulation, and no significant indirect effect was found. This contrasts with research highlighting the power of parasocial interaction to foster trust in digital environments (Sokolova & Perez, 2021, p. 45; Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 23). Other content characteristics, such as perceived authenticity may more potently shape parasociality than product-influencer fit alone.

Results demonstrate that trust is the key through which congruence ultimately influences purchase intentions, as highlighted by *H6*. Trust mediated the relationship: participants perceiving higher congruence in the fit condition reported greater trust, and this trust robustly predicted increased purchase intention. This pattern supports established theories of source credibility (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 81; Ohanian, 1990, p. 42) and aligns with evidence highlighting trust as the most influential factor in driving consumer conversion within influencer marketing (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 595).

While the absence of strong direct effects for influencer-brand visual congruence on trust and purchase intention may contrast with classic congruence and match-up frameworks, alternative theories shed important light on these findings. The Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989, pp. 313–315) proposes that consumers interpret endorsements as a means of transferring culturally embedded symbolic meanings from the influencer, through the product, to themselves. In this perspective, what matters most is not merely surface-level similarity, such as matching body type, but the influencer's ability to channel complex networks of cultural value, lifestyle, and identity into the brand and, by extension, the consumer's self-concept. This meaning transfer is not automatic: it relies on resonance between the influencer's persona and the product in ways that are contextually rich and meaningful and is more successful when the influencer is perceived as authentically embodying the meanings defined to both themselves and the product (McCracken, 1989, pp. 315–318).

Recent research on influencer marketing further highlights the centrality of authenticity in driving persuasive outcomes. Audrezet, et al., (2020, pp. 5–6; 28–29) show that consumers are aware

of the authenticity management strategies influencers deploy, distinguishing between transparent authenticity (disclosing sponsorship and sharing personal opinions about the brand) and passionate authenticity (promoting brands that truly align with their personal passions and values). Influencers who succeed at communicating authentic alignment, whether through narrative transparency, demonstrable enthusiasm, or creative freedom in content, are more likely to stimulate trust and engagement. As a result, followers' judgments are guided less by a surface "fit" and more by holistic cues of sincerity, integrity, and meaningful brand-influencer alignment (Audrezet et al., 2020, pp. 30–31). Rather than simple appearance-based congruence, it is the influencer's capacity to serve as a credible spokesperson for desirable cultural or aspirational meanings, and to present an engaging, authentic persona, that improves and increases consumer trust and purchase intention (McCracken, 1989, pp. 319–321; Audrezet et al., 2020, pp. 35–36).

Overall, these findings significantly advance the literature by highlighting that surface congruence is not an automatic gateway to persuasion. The real influence of influencer-brand fit is seen through its ability to enable aspirational connection and trust. These mechanisms are deeply rooted in psychological affinity rather than physical resemblance or expertise. For both scholars and practitioners, this underscores the necessity of a relationship-centric and psychologically nuanced approach when designing or evaluating influencer collaborations.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The current findings contribute important nuances to the literature on influencer marketing and consumer psychology by shifting focus away from visual or categorical congruence as a guaranteed path to persuasion. While much previous research suggests that simply matching an influencer's appearance or lifestyle with a product enhances effectiveness (Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 585; Shan et al., 2020, p. 590), the results here suggest a more complex reality. In this study, influencer-brand congruence did not directly affect consumer trust or purchase intention, which calls into question assumptions that fit alone is a sufficient cue for persuasion.

Instead, what stood out was the psychological engagement of the viewer. Specifically, aspirational identification emerged as a consistent mediating mechanism, suggesting that consumers are more influenced by whether they look up to and want to emulate the influencer than by simple surface-level match. Interestingly, although parasocial identification did predict trust on its own, it was not significantly shaped by congruence manipulation, and thus did not mediate the relationship between congruence and trust. This partial mediation pattern challenges linear interpretations of the Match-Up Hypothesis and supports a more layered model of consumer response, one that includes emotional connection, aspirational relevance, and trust as key variables (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 261). Importantly, this nuanced dynamic also has implications for Congruity Theory, which was

central to the theoretical framing of this study. While Congruity Theory (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955, p. 5) argues that higher perceived fit between source and object increases persuasive effectiveness, the current findings suggest that congruence alone is not sufficient unless it resonates with the audience's self-concept or ideal self. Thus, congruity may function less as a persuasive endpoint and more as a catalyst for identity-based processes like aspirational bonding.

Furthermore, these insights extend beyond Congruity Theory to inform Social Identification Theory, as the results show that trust is not driven, but by the consumer's ability to see the influencer as a model of the self or aspirational future self, highlighting the in-group dynamics that foster trust and behavioural alignment. Similarly, while Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21), emphasizes expertise and trustworthiness as central to persuasive power, the findings suggest that trustworthiness is most effectively signalled through identity alignment, rather than just physical appearance and the perceived expertise that this image can portray. Finally, the absence of significant effects for parasocial relationships contradicts earlier conceptualizations of them as the dominant mechanism in influencer marketing.

These findings reinforce the idea, drawn from source credibility theory (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 81), that trust remains the clearest predictor of purchase intent, even more than congruence or identification alone (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603). Ultimately, this study supports a shift in theoretical thinking. It shows that while congruence can play a role, it does so indirectly and inconsistently, primarily through identification mechanisms, especially aspirational ones. This suggests that the most effective influencer content isn't necessarily the most "matched," but the most relationally resonant. While early influencer marketing literature positioned parasocial relationships as the dominant psychological mechanism explaining trust and persuasion (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 59; Shan et al., 2020, p. 590), the current results challenge this assumption. In this study, parasocial bonds did not mediate the effect of influencer-brand congruence, indicating that a single exposure may be insufficient to foster the kind of emotional closeness required for parasociality to meaningfully shape outcomes. Instead, the data highlights the importance of aspirational identification as the key driver of trust. This supports the reasoning established in the theoretical framework, where identification was argued to be especially powerful in visually driven contexts like health and wellness endorsements. Theoretically, this finding marks a significant shift in the literature: it suggests that influencer effectiveness today may rely less on imagined relational intimacy and more on perceived self-enhancement and ideal alignment. This reorientation has important implications for scholars, marketers, and regulators seeking to understand the evolving psychological mechanisms that underpin digital persuasion.

6.3 Practical Implications

There are several takeaways for practitioners, consumers, and policymakers in influencer marketing. First, the lack of direct effects from visual congruence means brands should be cautious

about choosing influencers based solely on surface-level traits like appearance or demographic match. Instead, marketers should focus more on whether an influencer has a strong aspirational appeal, someone their followers want to emulate and feel inspired by (Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 398).

Second, trust continues to stand out as a make-or-break factor. To build real trust, brands should work with influencers who are perceived as sincere and knowledgeable, not just popular. This means looking for long-term partners who use the product authentically and can speak to it in their own voice, rather than relying on scripted or overly polished endorsements (Weinlich & Semerádová, 2024, p. 15; Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 603).

Third, the distinction between parasocial and aspirational identification offers clear direction for how to shape content. If the goal is deeper emotional loyalty, then content that fosters connection. If the goal is to position the product as aspirational or lifestyle-oriented, then campaigns should highlight influencers' achievements, values, or lifestyle in ways that audiences find inspiring.

Finally, in a digital landscape where audiences are increasingly sceptical of sponsored content, especially in health and wellness, authenticity is more important than ever. Rather than over-controlling the message, brands should give influencers space to share personal experiences, be honest about pros and cons, and engage naturally with their audience. This builds not just short-term attention but long-term credibility.

In essence, while congruence can play a role, the true strength of influencer marketing lies in its ability to create meaningful, trust-based relationships. Brands that understand and invest in these relational dynamics are more likely to see sustained success.

For influencers, these results suggest that the strategic emphasis should not lie solely in maintaining a fit aesthetic or aligning with product attributes at the surface level. Rather, they should focus on curating content that inspires aspirational identification, communicating values, lifestyle, and personal growth journeys that resonate deeply with audiences' identity goals. Fitness or health influencers, for instance, may benefit more from showing relatable transformation narratives than from showcasing peak physical form. For consumers, these findings offer critical insights into how trust is formed. Awareness of the mechanisms, particularly the emotional pull of aspirational identification, may help consumers better scrutinize influencer content and avoid unconscious emulation based on idealized portrayals that may not reflect reality or expertise.

Finally, for policymakers and platforms, this research underscores the urgency of addressing psychological influence mechanisms in regulation. As aspirational content becomes more persuasive than factual endorsement, guidelines around transparency, mental health impacts, and idealized body portrayals should reflect this evolving landscape. Disclosures should not only address sponsorship but also clarify when influencer narratives are aspirational or editorial rather than evidence based.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Limitations

Although this study offers valuable contributions to both theory and practice in influencer marketing, it is important to recognize certain limitations that shaped its findings and suggest areas for future research development.

7.1.1 Methodological Limitations

One of the clearest limitations relates to how the independent variable was manipulated. Rather than using tightly scripted, AI-created advertisements, the study relied on existing social media video content from real influencers. This choice made the research more ecologically valid and reflective of the actual digital marketing landscape, but it also introduced significant variation across videos in tone, message clarity, and how visibly the influencer matched the product. These inconsistencies may have weakened the effectiveness of the congruence manipulation and help explain why no significant direct effects were found for the hypothesized relationships between influencer-brand congruence, and purchase intentions and trust. Future research would benefit from combining real-world content with more controlled experimental conditions to balance realism with clearer causal inference.

Another limitation comes from the sample. Participants were mostly young, digitally active individuals recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. While this group is relevant to social media-based influencer campaigns, it does not reflect the diversity of the broader population. As a result, the generalizability of these findings to other age groups or less digitally immersed consumers is limited. Future studies could improve external validity by using stratified or random sampling methods to include a wider range of participants.

Although the manipulation and attention checks indicated that participants largely perceived the videos as intended, these assessments relied on self-report recognition tasks that may not fully capture the depth of participants' understanding or engagement (Podsakoff et al., 2003, p. 881). While the chi-square results confirmed statistical alignment between condition and perceived content, they did not measure interpretation of deeper congruence cues, such as alignment in values, expertise, or authenticity. Additionally, the use of multiple-choice format for the attention check may have constrained participant responses, potentially inflating recognition accuracy (Podsakoff et al., 2003, pp. 880–882). Future research could enhance manipulation checks by incorporating open-ended comprehension questions, qualitative probes, or physiological engagement metrics (e.g., eye-

tracking) to validate that, participants not only noticed but cognitively processed the intended congruence signals (Patton, 2015, pp. 55–74).

Finally, the study relied entirely on self-reported, cross-sectional data, which raises the possibility of response biases, such as social desirability or shared method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003, pp. 879–885). Although the reliability and validity of the scales were confirmed, adding behavioural or longitudinal data, such as actual purchase behaviour, social media engagement, or follow-up responses over time, would strengthen future studies and offer deeper insights into how these processes evolve. Lastly, qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups, thematic content analysis) can provide richer, more contextualized insights into the psychological processes behind perceived congruence, authenticity, and trust, thereby triangulating and strengthening the overall research design (Patton, 2015, pp. 8–10).

7.1.2 Conceptual Considerations

At the conceptual level, some limitations also emerged. Constructs like identification and trust were measured using validated items, but the scales were relatively short and might not fully capture the complexity of these concepts. For example, trust includes different dimensions such as honesty, expertise, and benevolence, which may not have been fully represented. Future research should consider using more detailed and multidimensional scales to reflect the full depth of these constructs, in line with current best practices (Han & Balabanis, 2023, p. 419).

Also, congruence in this study was mainly defined in terms of body image or physical appearance. While that reflects a common approach in health and wellness marketing, congruence can also involve value alignment, communication style, lifestyle compatibility, and expertise. It would be valuable for future research to manipulate and compare these different types of congruence to see which one's matter most in shaping identification, trust, and persuasive impact.

Lastly, parasocial bonds may be slow to form, often requiring repeated exposure, intimate storytelling, and sustained engagement rather than a single, brief product placement. This highlights a potential limitation of the current research design: a one-time exposure may not adequately capture the depth or development of parasocial relationships, which are traditionally conceptualized as evolving over time. However, this limitation also reflects a shifting media landscape. With the rise of short-form platforms like TikTok and Instagram, influencer-consumer relationships are increasingly shaped by quick encounters. This suggests that parasociality may be evolving, becoming more momentary, and potentially influenced by new forms of authenticity rather than long-term familiarity. As such, while this study did not find parasocial relationship to mediate the effect of congruence, it opens important avenues for rethinking how and when parasocial bonds are formed in today's digital environments.

Additional constructs could be considered and help explain and expand the conceptual model. In particular, perceived authenticity has emerged as a critical mechanism in contemporary influencer marketing, with evidence showing that when followers perceive an influencer as genuine and transparent, persuasive outcomes are often stronger (Audrezet, et al., 2020, pp. 5–6). Other mediators could include perceived expertise, perceived similarity (homophily), and emotional engagement, which recent studies have shown may bridge the gap between surface-level congruence and meaningful consumer response (Han & Balabanis, 2023, pp. 419–420).

7.2 Future Research Directions

Several directions for future research arise from the current findings. One priority is to examine how parasocial and aspirational identification change over time. Longitudinal or repeated-measures designs could help track how relationships with influencers evolve and whether trust and behavioural intention increase or fade with repeated exposure. Another important area is the interaction between identification and consumer scepticism. Categories like health, finance, and parenting often involve more consumer caution. Understanding when identification can override scepticism, and when it cannot, would help clarify how these psychological processes operate under different conditions.

Cultural variation deserves more attention. Attitudes about body image, endorsement of authenticity, and social credibility vary widely across cultures. Expectations of healthy-looking and fit vary from country to country and specially from West to East. Cross-cultural research or studies that include culturally diverse participants could help determine whether the findings from this study generalize across different contexts.

Together, these research directions would help build a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of how and why influencer marketing works.

7.3 Conclusion

This study examined whether the perceived match between an influencer's appearance and a health-oriented product brand affects consumer trust and intention to purchase. Rather than finding strong direct effects, the results pointed to the importance of underlying psychological mechanisms, particularly identification and trust as the real drivers of influence. The findings showed that while congruence on its own did not significantly increase trust or behavioural intention, its influence became more meaningful when it fostered aspirational identification. Participants who admired and wanted to emulate the influencer were more likely to trust the product, which in turn increased their willingness to consider buying it. Para-social identification was also associated with trust, but it was not significantly affected by congruence manipulation. This suggests that not all forms of identification respond in the same way to visual fit or brand alignment.

These results challenge the assumption that simply matching a product to a similar-looking influencer will lead to success. Instead, they highlight the deeper importance of connection, credibility, and emotional resonance. Consumers seem to care less about how well the influencer fits the product and more about whether they trust the person and feel inspired by them.

In practical terms, this suggests that brands should focus more on authenticity and long-term engagement rather than short-term visual matches. Influencers who genuinely use and believe in the product, and who connect with their audience on a personal level, may be far more effective than those who simply look for the product. This is especially important in sensitive markets like health and wellness, where trust is crucial.

Future research can take this work further by exploring other types of congruence, using diverse samples, and examining how these processes unfold over time and across cultures. Doing so will help build a fuller picture of how influencer marketing shapes consumer thought and behaviour.

All in all, the study emphasizes that effective influencer marketing is less about image and more about relationships. What matters most is not just who the influencer is or what they look like, but how well they can build trust and inspire the people who follow them.

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Appendix 1: Stimulus Links

<https://youtu.be/-pUHv3g2miE>

<https://youtu.be/UviBtXc0eGo>

<https://youtu.be/d4XVO2KSEtg>

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Thesis Survey

Start of Block: Welcome + Consent

Page Break

Study Welcome to the Survey — Erasmus University Rotterdam Thank you for taking part in this academic research study, conducted as part of a Master’s thesis project in Media & Business at Erasmus University. Your response will help us understand how people respond to social media video’s. You will be shown a short video and then asked to answer a series of questions about your impressions. Please note: Participation is voluntary, and you may exit at any time. Your responses will remain anonymous and used for academic purposes only. The survey will take approximately 7 minutes to complete. Please answer each question **carefully and honestly**. There are no right or wrong answers — we are sincerely interested in your personal views. **CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA** All research data are collected anonymously and treated confidentially. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION** Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to begin the survey, or stop your participation at any point, without explanation or consequence. **FURTHER INFORMATION** If you have any questions about this study, either before or after participation, you may contact the responsible researcher: Sophie Cupello Email: [689964sc@eur.nl] This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam. For questions about your privacy rights, you may contact Erasmus University’s Data Protection Officer at: fg@eur.nl

Consent Informed Consent If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate, please click “I agree” to begin the questionnaire.

- I consent (1)
- I do not consent (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Informed Consent If you understand the information above and freely consent to participate, pleas... = I do not consent

End of Block: Welcome + Consent

Start of Block: Block 13



Q44 What is your age?

Skip To: End of Survey If Condition: What is your age? Is Less Than 18. Skip To: End of Survey.

End of Block: Block 13

Start of Block: Neutral

Q22 Please watch the following video carefully:

Q17 Timing
First Click (1)
Last Click (2)
Page Submit (3)
Click Count (4)

Q47 Click to write the question text

Page Break

End of Block: Neutral

Start of Block: Fit

Q20 Please watch the following video carefully:

Q16 Timing

First Click (1)

Last Click (2)

Page Submit (3)

Click Count (4)

Q49 Click to write the question text

Page Break

End of Block: Fit

Start of Block: No Fit

Q21 Please watch the following video carefully:

Q15 Timing
First Click (1)
Last Click (2)
Page Submit (3)
Click Count (4)

Q48 Click to write the question text

Page Break

End of Block: No Fit

Start of Block: Purchase intentions

Q35 I would consider buying this product based on the video I saw.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Agree (4)
- Strongly Agree (5)

Page Break

End of Block: Purchase intentions

Start of Block: Trust

Q33 I believe the claims made about this health product

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q34 I believe this product is safe to use.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly agree (5)
-

Page Break

End of Block: Trust

Start of Block: Perceived Congruence

Q26 Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements about the video content. Please answer based on your general impression while watching.

Q1 The $\{e://Field/TargetTerm\}$ was a good match for the product being promoted.

- Strongly disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (4)
 - Agree (6)
 - Strongly agree (7)
-

Q3 There is a strong match between the appearance or tone of the $\{e://Field/TargetTerm\}$ and the product's brand identity.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (4)
 - Agree (6)
 - Strongly Agree (7)
-

Q4 The $\{\text{e://Field/TargetTerm}\}$ visually represents the health outcomes associated with this product.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (4)
 - Agree (6)
 - Strongly Agree (7)
-

Q18 The visual style and personality presented in the video were consistent with the health and wellness goals of the brand.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (4)
 - Agree (6)
 - Strongly Agree (7)
-

Q19 The $\{\text{e://Field/TargetTerm}\}$ fit the image of someone who would genuinely use this kind of product.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

End of Block: Perceived Congruence

Start of Block: Perceived Credibility

Q28 I trust the $\{e://Field/TargetTerm\}$'s opinion about this product.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q29 The $\{e://Field/TargetTerm\}$ appears honest and sincere.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q30 The influencer would promote this product only if they believed in it.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q31 The influencer seems knowledgeable about wellness and nutrition.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q32 The influencer is an expert in health or fitness topics.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Page Break

End of Block: Perceived Credibility

Start of Block: Parasocial Relationship

Q37 I felt a sense of personal connection with the style or tone of the video

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q38 I could imagine being friends with the person featured in or behind the video

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Page Break

End of Block: Parasocial Relationship

Start of Block: Aspirational Identification

Q39 I admire the lifestyle or aesthetic portrayed in the video

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q40 The video reflect values I want to embody

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Q41 I aspire to achieve lifestyle or aesthetic similar to the one presented in the vide

- Strongly Disagree (1)
 - Disagree (2)
 - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
 - Agree (4)
 - Strongly Agree (5)
-

Page Break

End of Block: Aspirational Identification

Start of Block: Manipulation check

Q23 Which of the following best describes the content of the video you just watched?

- A fitness-oriented person promoting a greens supplement (1)
- A day in my life video, with an influencer explaining her morning routine and benefits of the product (2)
- A video of a green supplement with no person being shown in the frame being mixed in a cup (3)

Page Break

End of Block: Manipulation check

Start of Block: Demographics

Q24 What is your gender?

- Female (1)
 - Male (2)
 - Non-binary (3)
 - Prefer not to say (4)
-

Q11 On average how much time do you spend on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Tiktok, Youtube, etc.) per day?

- Less than 30 minutes (1)
 - 30 minutes to 1 hour (2)
 - 1 to 2 hours (3)
 - 3 to 4 hours (4)
 - 4 to 5 hours (5)
 - More than 5 hours (6)
-

Q12 How familiar are you with the brand Bloom?

- Not at all eg: Never heard of this brand (6)
- Slightly familiar (7)
- Somewhat familiar (8)
- Moderately familiar (9)
- Very familiar eg: Used or purchased their products before (10)

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Debrief

Q21 Thank you for participating in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how different styles of social media content influence people's perceptions of health product endorsements. Specifically, we are investigating how the appearance of an influencer — or the absence thereof — affect the perceived fit with a wellness product and how this may influence trust and purchase intentions. In this experiment, you were randomly assigned to view one of three short videos that varied in their presentation style: one featuring a gym-focused influencer discussing a supplement, another capturing a lifestyle vlog without explicit fitness visuals, and one that showed the product with no person in frame. These variations are designed to test whether viewers perceive differences in “influencer-brand congruence” based on subtle and explicit visual and thematic cues. Your responses will help us accurately measure how different types of influencers and content styles impact consumer perception and behaviour. All your answers will remain anonymous and confidential. If you have any questions about this study or wish to withdraw your data, please contact the researcher Sophie Cupello at [689964sc@eur.nl].

End of Block: Debrief

Appendix 3: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Sophie Cupello

Student ID: 689964

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Freya

Date: 26/06/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [ChatGPT and Grammarly, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Sophie Cupello

Date of Signature: 26/06/2025

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Sophie Cupello

based on my research how can i explain the three conditions of my experiment ?

Explanation of the Three Experimental Conditions in Your Research

Your research investigates the **impact of influencer-brand congruence on consumer trust and purchase intention** in the context of health product endorsements. To test this, your **experiment employs a between-subjects design with three conditions** that manipulate the level of congruence between the influencer and the product. Below is a detailed **expert-level explanation** of these conditions.

1. High Congruence Condition (Expert Influencer Condition)

Definition & Rationale:

- In this condition, the influencer **strongly aligns** with the product being endorsed, meaning they have **expertise, credibility, and a relevant background** in the product category.
- This condition represents a **scenario where consumers expect and accept the endorsement as natural** due to perceived expertise and authenticity.

Example Manipulation:

- A **certified nutritionist or fitness coach** endorsing a **protein supplement**.
- A **well-known health influencer** who frequently posts about wellness promoting a **dietary vitamin**.

Tentative schedule: thesis

Deadline	Task	Reviews	Notes
Feb 25 th - March 11 th	Direction proposal		
Mid-March (TBD)	Methods, questionnaire/materials*		
March 21 st	Methods section	Peer review	
March 28 th	Methods section	Supervisor	
April 4 th	Start data collection		
April 18 th	End of data collection		
April 18 th	Full literature section	Peer review	
April 25 th	Full literature section	Supervisor	
May 2 nd	Results*	Peer review	
May 9 th	Results	Supervisor	
May 16 th	Intro, conclusion and discussion	Peer review	
May 23 rd	Intro, conclusion and discussion	Supervisor	
June 6 th	Start of F.U.E.I. course	Supervisor	Last feedback
June 20 th	Finalist deadline (Course)		
June 30 th	Ultimate deadline (RNO-outlet)		

- Week-by-week planning of activities that need to be completed, to submit a full draft thesis before the deadline based on the foto . max 1 page include that this is the proposed timeline of my thesis advisor

Proposed Week-by-Week Timeline for Thesis Completion

Below is the week-by-week schedule to ensure a full draft of the thesis is submitted before the ultimate deadline (June 30th). This timeline follows the advisor's proposed plan and includes all major milestones.

Week-by-Week Schedule

February 25 – March 11

- Task:** Finalize and receive approval on the thesis proposal.
- Goal:** Confirm feasibility and direction of the research.

Mid-March (TBD)

- Task:** Develop questionnaire and materials for data collection.
- Goal:** Ensure methods align with research objectives and gain feedback if necessary.

March 21 – March 28



give me title and max 5 key words

Title:

The Impact of Influencer-Brand Congruence on Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention in Health Product Endorsements

Keywords:

- Influencer Marketing
- Brand Congruence
- Consumer Trust
- Purchase Intention
- Parasocial Relationships

How can I summarize key findings of the papers to help explain key concepts of my research?

Summarizing Key Findings from Papers to Explain Your Research Concepts

To strengthen your research, it's crucial to summarize key findings from **relevant literature** and link them to the **core concepts of your study**. Below, I provide **concise summaries of key papers** and how they help explain the fundamental theories and variables in your research:

what are the sampling methods and what are they good for

Sampling Methods and Their Uses

1. Random Sampling

- **Definition:** Every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected.
- **Uses:** Ideal for ensuring unbiased representation and increasing generalizability. It is particularly useful in large-scale studies where access to the entire population is feasible. Random sampling minimizes selection bias and allows for more robust statistical analysis.
- **Example:** Selecting survey respondents randomly from a complete list of registered users in a database.

2. Stratified Sampling

- **Definition:** The population is divided into subgroups (strata) based on shared characteristics (e.g., age, gender, income level), and random samples are taken from each stratum.
- **Uses:** Ensures representation of key subgroups within the population. It is valuable in studies where understanding differences between strata is essential.
- **Example:** Recruiting participants by ensuring equal representation of males and females across different age groups.

3. Convenience Sampling

- **Definition:** Participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to take



is there any content that is put in the wrong section? Do a thorough check on my text and give me the respective sections - Act as an expert academic writer

Read documents

After a thorough review of your Methods content, here are the key areas where some material would be **better placed in different sections** according to **APA 7 scholarly conventions**. I've reorganized the content below under correct headings and explained the rationale for each adjustment.

✔ 3.1 Research Design and Rationale (Correct Placement)

- Most of your content here is correctly placed.
- Justification for experimental design, benefits of between-subjects approach, ecological validity, random assignment—all belong here.

⚠ Misplaced: Stimuli Descriptions in Design Section

Excerpt needing relocation:

"In this design, each participant is randomly assigned to see one version of the video stimulus..."
"High congruence: Fitness influencer with wellness product..."

✔ Move this to 3.2 Stimuli Development and Product Selection

💡 This belongs in a section specifically devoted to **stimulus construction**, not general design.

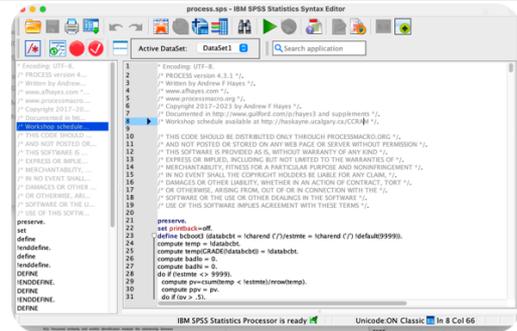
How to create a visual framework for this relationships

To visually represent the theoretical framework described in your conclusion, a conceptual diagram or path model is ideal. Here's a step-by-step structure for building it:

◆ Title: Influencer-Brand Congruence and Purchase Intention in Health Product Marketing

◆ Main Components (box nodes):

1. **Influencer-Brand Congruence**
(Visual/lifestyle alignment; body image cues)
2. **Mediators**
 - **Parasocial Relationship**
(Emotional, one-sided bond with influencer)
 - **Aspirational Identification**
(Desire to emulate influencer)
3. **Trust**
(Perceived credibility, authenticity)
4. **Purchase Intention**
(Likelihood to buy health products)



I have downloaded process to my computer in order to perform regression analysis in SPSS. Act as an expert and help me. This is what I see if I click on the Process SPSS v4.3. What should I do next ?

You're off to a good start by downloading the PROCESS macro by Andrew F. Hayes for SPSS — it's an excellent tool for conducting regression-based analyses including mediation, moderation, and conditional process models.

Based on the screenshot, it looks like you've opened the process . sps syntax file in the **IBM SPSS Statistics Syntax Editor**. This is the right file to load the PROCESS macro into SPSS.

✓ Here's what to do next: