

# The Role of Social Media Influencers in University Students' Purchase Decisions in Saudi Arabia

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent of the role played by social media influencers in determining university students' consumer decisions-making process in Saudi Arabia. In addition, it aimed to identify which of the influencer characteristics, attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, contribute the most to student choices. The study was conducted on a total of 509 students from different Saudi universities who were purposively selected based on the student population. It was found that attractiveness and expertise were the most critical factors in purchasing decisions, and trustworthiness was second. While having an impact, the influence of trustworthiness was not as direct as the influence of attractiveness and expertise. This paper is novel in that it focuses on the student population of Saudi Arabia, which is not seen in previous research on influencer marketing. This study also analysed the comprehensive audience appeal of different dimensions of attribution on consumer behaviour in the scintillating digital environment studied.

**Keywords:** Social Media Influencers, Trustworthiness, Expertise, Attractiveness, Consumer Decision-Making Process

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has risen to become an integral part of consumer behaviour and the foundation for how marketing strategies are created. In the world of social media influencers, specifically on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube, consumers are prepared to believe the influencers who exert influence on what they buy and how they behave. Influencers are very important in Saudi Arabia as purchasing decisions are greatly influenced by them, especially among the youth demographic (Sindi et al., 2023). Since they are regarded as the local version of celebrities, people think they are much more relatable than any traditional celebrity, and these influencers are also credible sources of information; therefore, these influencers are very powerful within the local context (Almutarie, 2024). With so much impact on a consumer's decision-making process, it is often measured by some way or the other, such as trustworthiness, expertise, or attractiveness, among others, because in all these, it impacts their persuasive ability (Abu-Dalbouh et al., 2022).

Influencers desiring to manipulate consumer behaviour should be trusted. A trustworthy influencer makes followers feel it is a bit more believable to follow the influencer. Trust is even more important when family and community values in Saudi Arabia matter, when decisions are made (Al-Harbi & Badawi, 2022). This is backed by numerous studies that show that when consumers feel like an influencer is reliable, they more often want to listen to the influencer's recommendation and process buying (Yıldırım, 2021).

A second component that determines how influencers affect consumer behaviour is expertise. Consumers in Saudi Arabia are also sensitive to influencers who perform expertly in certain domains, including fashion, health, or technology (Ren et al., 2023). Having a perception of an influencer's knowledge in their niche can change the level of engagement and influence the purchase decision. For this reason, it is understood that consumers are more likely to trust influencers who are perceived as experts and product endorsements (Harb, 2024).

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Consumer preference is also shaped by attractiveness, which usually works together by trustworthiness and expertise. In Saudi Arabia, where appearance and what people wear also have cultural importance, therefore, find attractive influencers to appeal to a large audience (Shamim et al., 2024). As an example, studies have revealed that consumers are more likely to trust an influencer if he or she meets some aesthetic standards, because success and trendiness can be associated with it. As is particularly strong for these sectors, in the fashion and beauty sector, attractiveness acts as a signal of quality and prestige (Cheung et al., 2022).

The combination of these three factors, trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, creates a potent influence on consumer behaviour. Brand marketers and brands in Saudi Arabia might find it valuable to understand how these factors interact to understand how the traditional marketing strategies are being challenged by digital platforms (Dinh & Lee, 2021). More so, the more an influencer becomes aligned with these qualities, the more likely they will sway a consumer's decision regarding a product purchase, brand loyalty, service usage, and even that consumer's social status (M. Kim & Baek, 2022). As digitalisation in Saudi Arabia has been rapid and the use of social media has skyrocketed among the public, particularly the young population, what influencers say has a great influence on the decision process (Jamil et al., 2024).

In Saudi Arabia, influencers continue to shape consumer decisions, and it is necessary to understand how these characteristics work in the local context. In this study, these dimensions will be analysed and examined to determine how each factor considered impacts the decision or the process of decision-making. However, to truly understand that relationship and leverage it for the benefit of Saudi consumers, brands will do well to use this information to craft targeted influencer marketing suits for Saudi consumers (Ao et al., 2023). Therefore, the changing role of social media influencers in consumer decision-making reflects broader trends in the market and market trust.

The rise of social media influencers has changed the face of consumer decision-making, especially in current marketing strategies. Among these influencers, they have become vital role players in driving purchasing behaviours, as consumers in Saudi Arabia are known to be highly engaged with social media (Alamer et

al., 2023). As the appearance of digital personalities gains more attention, it has not yet been investigated comprehensively on what extent they alter the Saudi consumers' decision-making processes (Masuda et al., 2022). Though social media influencers are instrumental in directing consumer preference opinions, among other decisions, the role they play in the Saudi Arabian socio-cultural context is not well explored. It is mainly for brands, marketers, and policymakers to understand how the behaviour of the influencers affects a consumer's choice, to come up with strategies to go with the changing consumer face in the region.

While prior studies have identified general effects of social media influencers on consumer behaviour, a gap has been identified in understanding the specific dynamics within Saudi Arabia. Almost all previous studies have examined Western markets, leaving a wide knowledge gap regarding the way influencers work across other cultures, particularly within Middle Eastern perspectives. In addition, although influencer marketing strategies are broadly employed, the details relative to how these strategies are received by Saudi customers, characterised by unique cultural, religious, and social parameters, have yet to be sufficiently researched. This necessitates research that explores the influencer's impact on the Saudi consumers' decision-making process directly and indirectly, and offers insights into the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of their involvement with influencer marketing.

In this light, this study is of great importance in academic research as well as practical marketing applications, especially in the Saudi Arabian digital context. The research explores the role of social media influencers in the decision-making process for consumers and offers a valuable understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural factors determining the behavioural patterns of the consumer in the region (Brooks et al., 2021). In light of the raised position of social media platforms and influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia, it's important to grasp the way sensitivity, cleverness, and gracefulness of the YouTube influencers impact the clients' choice for brands (Alghanim, 2022). Furthermore, this research provides an empirical examination of the role played by digital influencers in a special socio-cultural context, which has been less explored than in existing literature. The findings of this study could also help in the policy

development for digital marketing practices, regulating to maintain ethical standards and consumer protection in the era of influencer-driven marketing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Media Influencers

The rapid growth of social media platforms has made university students in Saudi Arabia extraordinarily fond of marketing utilising these platforms. Channelling influences people with large followings have come to play a major role in people's purchase decisions in the world of social media (Saad et al., 2025). They are central figures in modern marketing because they can create compelling and relatable content and attract their audience. Influencers have a key role in student buying decisions, especially in the case of fashion, Beauty, and technology products that attract Saudi youth interest, as mentioned by Zhao et al. (2024). These personalities do not simply influence what brands they endorse, but rather what brands they end up being influential in shaping opinions, trends, and in some cases, perceptions of brand identity.

Saudi students have increasingly turned to social media to guide their shopping choices and have relied on influencers' opinions because of the increasing reliance on social media for shopping recommendations. Today, students are more likely to buy products following the endorsements of influencers and not classical advertisements (Alibrahim, 2024). In truth, the social media influencer sphere has been turned into an effective way for marketers to touch and influence the younger generation directly, whose involvement in conventional advertising techniques is quite uncertain (Zaki et al., 2025). Additionally, the ability to shop online and receive recommendations from influencers has made the purchase decision much easier for students to make, given that they might have never discovered the product without the help of an influencer (Shuqair et al., 2024).

This is not only why influencers are so popular in Saudi Arabia, it is because the content from them is authentic. Influencers who resonate with their lifestyle values and aspirations are sought after by the Saudi youth, especially university students (Alnasser, 2023). The fact that cultural sensitivities are important when making influencer

marketing campaigns is proven by the preference for relatable influencers. These influencers choose to associate with Saudi values such as modesty and family-oriented ones to resonate well with their audience and drive purchasing behaviour (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023).

Influencers hold enormous power when it comes to influencing the consumer's decision and the way that they are purchasing, however, the mechanisms by which influencers have an impact on student purchases are multiple. Studies also show that for an influencer to be effective, it has to display trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Together, these factors help influence credibility about the influencer and the effectiveness of endorsements. Additionally, the rise of the micro-influencers, who are individuals with small but still engaged fan bases, has been very prominent in influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Further, micro-influencers, more often, perceived as much more relatable and relatable, therefore their impact on student purchasing behaviour is much bigger.

Again, as the influencer landscape evolves, one of the most crucial components of a Saudi influencer's success will be the integration of influencers into the country's cultural and social landscape. Students in Saudi Arabia are exposed to numerous influences because Saudi Arabia is transforming its social and economic systems (Joshi et al., 2025). While the altering trends of environments will sway influencers to rapidly adapt and modify their behaviour based on their needs and audience demand, their ability to be flexible and adaptable will ultimately maintain and grow their influence in such an unpredictable environment (Alves De Castro & Carthy, 2021). That's understandable, as we observe that the influencers who can match their content with the cultural, social, and economic change taking place in Saudi Arabia in the long term are more likely to stay relevant and influential.

### Trustworthiness

Social media influencers are a big part of any global marketing strategy, and their credibility is one of the key factors that make them effective. When it comes to an influencer's followers, the trustworthiness of an influencer can have a huge effect on behaviours such as purchasing or on accepting opinions and attitudes (Engel et al., 2024). Trust in this sense refers to someone who has contributed to your engram, someone who is honest,

reliable, and competent in their content. If influencers are perceived as reliable, they can influence the audience positively, for example, in socially dominant markets such as Saudi Arabia, where the use of social media is increasing significantly (Alhomaïd, 2023).

Trustworthiness is enhanced by perceived authenticity of the influencer, transparency in sponsorships, and delivering valuable content and truth. If the personal brand of the influencer matches the values and interests of an audience, then the influencer is perceived to be more attractive and credible (Pradhan et al., 2023). Authenticity becomes critical in markets like Saudi Arabia, as people there like to value traditional values and authenticity developed over time. If, for whatever reason, the influencer is seen as not inauthentic or pushes product promotion too hard without alignment to the influencer's brand or values, people do not find it believable (D. Y. Kim & Kim, 2023).

Organisations also assess the credibility of influencers appear to work with other brands. In markets like Saudi Arabia, which has increasingly more consumers who are conscious of who's who in influencer marketing, influencers who boast about their patronages or sponsored content are more trusted (Ooi et al., 2023). When influencers don't disclose this relationship, trust is diminished, and the act is labelled as dishonest. Being transparent is important because it shows the audience what kind of content is being taken in (Bohairy, 2024).

Moreover, as in all other societies and cultures, trust establishment happens within the context of cultural and social norms of advertising and media consumption in Saudi Arabia. The preference to add a 'cultural touch' and respect for local customs will help to create strong trust among consumers in an area where traditional values have a strong influence on consumer behavior (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022). For brands that want to reach the Saudi audiences, this is important because any lack of understanding of cultural norms will harm both the influencer's credibility and the brand's reputation.

The social media influencers' environment in Saudi Arabia is unique and dynamic, where the highly engaged youth population is very connected to digital platforms. Across platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, the Kingdom is among the highest in the world in using social media, with engagement (Hudders et al.,

2021). This makes it possible for influencers to have an extremely large number of followers to have, providing them with unprecedented opportunity to build large followings, but comes with an incredible amount of responsibility for those influencers to remain credible and trustworthy (Almoalad, 2024). In Saudi Arabia, the yield is the yield, and they are highly discerning when it comes to influencers. Influencers have the opinions them and they appreciate the opinions of influencers whom they perceive as real and relatable. But as influencer culture in the region grows rapidly, so too does concern over the validity of the content (Al Kurdi et al., 2022). When influencers promote products and lifestyles that may not resonate with local values or ethics, that erosion of trust can occur based on the fact that followers feel they are being manipulated or hoodwinked.

New rules are emerging on the disclosure of any paid promotions and sponsored content in the Saudi Arabian market of influencer-marketing. The country's effort to regulate digital platforms is also reflected in aligning the content to the national standards. Those who are known to be transparent in their partnership with brands and also follow the regulatory guidelines are much more likely to keep the trust of their followers (Lajnef, 2023). In addition to that, in this regulatory landscape, influencers and brands not only operate but also focus on the consideration of building certain ethical practices in influencer marketing, a domain that is gaining ground in the region (Al Jaed & Badghish, 2021). More often than not, social media platforms themselves are key to the perception of influencer trustworthiness. Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter have built-in functionality that allows an influencer to mark content as sponsored or paid to maintain the level of transparency (Elmansori et al., 2023). Such tools are effective only to the extent that they are widely used and broadly accepted by influencers, and are broadly enforceable by the platform.

It could be argued that authenticity is the main contributing factor to the trustworthiness of social media influencers in Saudi Arabia. Consumers are becoming more sceptical of over-curated content generally, but especially regarding product endorsements or promotional content (AGGAD, 2022). In the context of being a country like Saudi Arabia, where family and community values are at the core of societal values and influencers present themselves to be authentic and

authentic to their audience, such influencers are more likely to connect on a deeper level with their audience (Alomair, 2022). While authenticity in influencer marketing does not solely come from looking 'real', it also entails the content made by the individual and its alignment with their own personal values, experience, and interests. People nowadays find it more relatable and trustworthy when influencers share personal stories, values, and even opinions (Al-Ajlan et al., 2022). In a society that places a lot of value on traditional values and modesty, this authenticity is noteworthy. Such a culturally sensitive market may find it difficult for influencers, no matter their level of influence, to build trust with their audiences for being "too commercial" or "too polished".

In addition, influencers who feature their weakness or flaws are perceived as being more trustworthy. Traditional advertising tends to polish already polished images, but the influencers who are ready to show their true selves can make more long-lasting trust with their audience (Alzughabi et al., 2021). This is the opposite of influencers who edit their content to have a perfect image when compared to the everyday reality in the day-to-day life of their followers. Authenticity can also be demonstrated depending on how influencers in Saudi Arabia manage their cultural sensibilities (Powell & Pring, 2024). This will help to build credibility when it helps to address local issues, reflect cultural practices, and local traditions. More trustworthy is the influencer who engages in controversial topics or offers content that potentially lands in the 'not quite appropriate' area, since these influencers are thought to follow a respectful approach to local culture and values.

### **Expertise**

The effectiveness of a social media influencer is greatly influenced by their expertise. Individuals who seem to have a high level of skill or knowledge in a specific area tend to be thought more given and trusted by consumers (Alwafi et al., 2022). Recent studies corroborate the fact that expertise does it refer to the influencer's professional qualification alone, but also relates to their perception of the 'depth of their knowledge and their experience and credibility in that field' (Pop et al., 2022). Influencers in the Saudi market create greater trust and engagement because people view the influence of influencers as expertise in the

respective fields, such as fashion, technology, and beauty (Yazid et al., 2022). Typically, influencers are expected to explain detailed insights, tutorials, or reviews regarding the target audience, so that they appear as authentic and credible sources of information. For instance, beauty influencers who put on detailed makeup tutorials, or maybe even skincare routines, are considered more credible than others because consumers are looking for an informed opinion from other consumers on products (Lee & Eastin, 2021). This expertise and the ability to project a sense of trust directly translate to an influencer who can make a difference in consumer decisions.

In the digital world, social media influencers (SMIs) have turned much of the marketing landscape, and even search for contracted and paid services has been used by these influencers (Pradhan et al., 2023). In countries with a high penetration of social media, younger demographics such as Saudi Arabia, influencers have a major influence on the behaviour of consumers. These influencers act as powerful opinion leaders who influence their followers on what they will purchase, the usual means of advertising not being applicable (Alamer et al., 2023). The studies carried on in the Gulf region show that influencers have a very strong influence in forming brand perception and creating trust (Shuqair et al., 2024). Such a relationship between influencers with their audience is centred not only on one, but rather possibly several ingredients (such as expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) which facilitate the affair of an influencer to help make a consumer buying decisions (Lee et al., 2022). While not necessarily a new feature, influencers in Saudi Arabia, and particularly the Middle East, are utilising their brands to promote products across the spectrum of beauty products, to technology as a means to engage more consumers in B2C and D2C projects (Bastrygina et al., 2024).

### **Attractiveness**

Another important dimension to influencer marketing that hugely influences consumer behaviour is attractiveness. For example, we have seen that the physical appearance of an influencer is a very important some would even say central factor when it comes to how much influence they can be seen to have in visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Alamer et al., 2023). Research shows that there are high chances that attractive influencers will receive more follower attention, a higher

percentage of engagement and a stronger emotional attachment with their followers (Almutarie, 2024). In particular, appearance is a prerequisite for keeping a beautiful look in the beauty and fashion industries, within which attractiveness has a great influence. Beauty guidelines in Saudi Arabia are often rooted in culture, and hence releasing influencers based on their closeness to local Beauty Standards can help build a more personal and enticing image (Ren et al., 2023). That is, whereas attractiveness is important, it is not enough; it needs to be joined by other factors, such as expertise, to anchor the credibility and a lasting consumer trust.

While some are more knowledgeable and some more attractive, the most successful social media influencers are those who combine expertise and attractiveness working together to enhance the personal brand (Ao et al., 2023). When put together, these two elements can give you a more persuasive and persuasive marketing strategy. For instance, in the Saudi market, influencers are known to post about a product they are aware of and are attractive to attract followers' attention, their engagement rates, and have a more substantial impact on followers' decisions to buy something (Yildirim, 2021). Attractiveness and expertise combined ensure a stronger emotional dimension of the relationship because those influencers are perceived not only as attractive but also as credible and well-informed (Brooks et al., 2021). The combination of the two increases the likelihood of positive consumer outcomes, including an increase in purchase intention as well as greater brand loyalty.

## Hypotheses Development

In the digital age, finding trusted people to follow offers more security to consumers during purchases. Alghanim (2022) suggests that research indicates that there is a correlation between consumer engagement and purchasing decisions and the perceived trustworthiness of an influencer. Relevant influencers whom consumers can trust are more likely to inspire more action from the consumer (Ao et al., 2023). A trust is created by authentic content, consistency, and confession of any paid partnerships or sponsorships in a manner that gives honesty a good name (Alhomaïd, 2023). Trustworthiness is even more important in Saudi Arabia, where social norms play a very big role in shaping consumer behaviour. Such trusted influencers are considered not just opinion leaders, but also credible sources of information, and their

influence goes beyond so-called social media to real-world purchase behaviours (Alves De Castro & Carthy, 2021). Studies on the connection between trust and decision-making have shown that influencers with greater levels of trust will engage more with consumers, have them stick to the brand, and much more, boosting conversion rates.

*H1: There is a significant impact of the trustworthiness of social media influencers on consumers' decision-making process.*

The other essential factor that can affect consumers' decisions significantly is expertise. Consumers are more likely to take an influencer's opinion when they are regarded as an expert in their field, which is in the form of beauty technology or fashion (Harb, 2024). It has been proven by studies that if consumers perceive the influencer as an expert, they will be more likely to trust and respond to the influencer's product recommendation (Masuda et al., 2022). This is especially significant in specialities such as the high-tech industry or the beauty industry, where the majority of customers tend to ask for detailed, technical knowledge before buying. In Saudi Arabia, especially where consumers are inclined toward product reviews that are detailed and reliable, influencers are most likely to be consumers who have a strong sense of expertise in the scope of MLM's, influencers (Alnasser, 2021). Credibility of the influencer results from the expertise he possesses, as audiences consider them knowledgeable and capable of offering useful advice. According to Kim and Kim (2023), influencer expertise can be manifested in educating consumers about products, delivering informative content, or sharing their own experience with a product, through which both informed consumer choices and high conversion rates are driven.

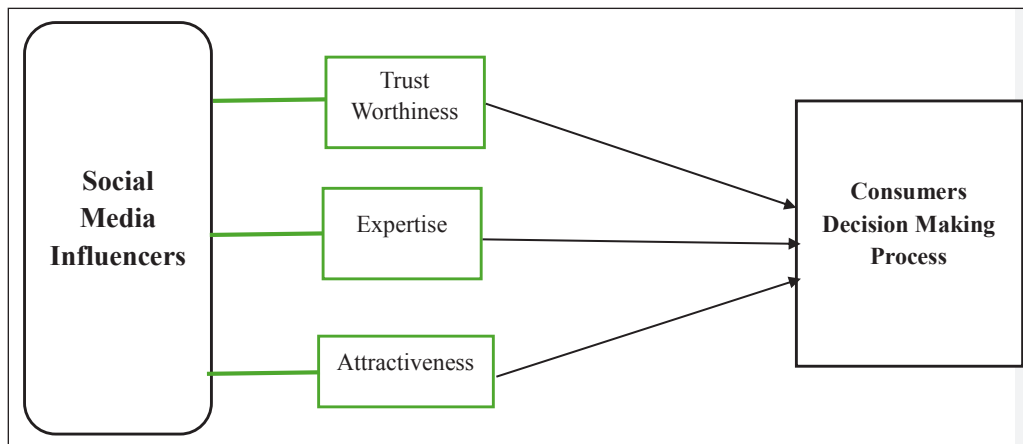
*H2: There is a significant impact of the expertise of social media influencers on consumers' decision-making process.*

Alghanim (2022) mentions that physical attractiveness is the first thing that will grab a consumer's attention as they see the influencer on any of the visual platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, where emphasis is given to the image and appearance. In Saudi Arabia, beauty standards are a very vital part of social and cultural expectations, playing a very crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour (Zaki et al., 2025). Research has shown consumers to be more likely to follow and trust influencers who fit the

bill of beauty ideals or even applicants of beauty (Han & Balabanis, 2024). There has been a significant amount of research on the attractiveness and relationship with consumer decision-making, from the perspective that attractive influencers tend to achieve higher engagement rates, brand recall, and purchase intention (Alhomaidd, 2023). But attractiveness by itself does not always indicate that you will purchase; in fact, it works best in tandem with credibility and expertise. Hence, influencers bearing attraction plus other favourable attributes equivalent to

trustworthiness or expertise will experience a major effect on the audience's decision-making (Engel et al., 2024). This makes the complexity of the influencer consumer dynamic very well explained: attractiveness is important, but it is not the only factor in determining purchase behaviour.

*H3: There is a significant impact of the attractiveness of social media influencers on consumers' decision-making process.*



**Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework**

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a deductive approach, a common approach in scientific studies, whereby hypotheses are tested using established theories or frameworks. The deductive approach enables researchers to test out theories and concepts in a particular context, as in the case of the role of social media influencers in university students' buying decisions in Saudi Arabia. To test the impact of the key dimensions that are trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of influencers on students' decision-making processes, the study formulated hypotheses based on previous literature (Pearson et al., 2019). The deductive research approach also allowed us to test preconceived notions about social media influencers' influence and contributed to an increasingly well-developed body of literature related to social media influencers (Creswell, 2018).

The population consisted of 402 university students from several institutions in Saudi Arabia, and because of

this, the sample size for this study was relatively small. This sample size is sufficient to provide robustness to the results and thus to generalise the results in a Saudi university student context. For structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis, a sample size of 509 or even more is deemed adequate, and, as Hair et al. (2017) point out, it offers a sound statistical basis for analysing relationships between variables that are complex. The participants were drawn from various universities so that the data represented a great deal of opinions and behaviours. This is purposive sampling, a non-random technique in which the participants were selected based on the specific characteristics of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). This can be considered a case where the study was aimed at university students who actively use social media platforms, as social media influencers are the primary audience for the same. The use of this purposeful selection enabled the participants to possess adequate knowledge and experience to be able to contribute to the topic under investigation.

Data collection in this study was carried out through a questionnaire to obtain the information on the variables of importance to trust, scrutiny, the appeal of a social media influencer, and the consumer decision-making process. To measure the trustworthiness of influencers, a set of 5 items adapted from Herath et al. (2025) was used to assess key attributes that will affect people's levels of trust in an influencer (e.g., reliability, honesty, authenticity). Just as expertise was assessed using 4 items on the perceived competence and knowledge extent of influencers in their particular domain, which were sourced from Herath et al. (2025). The third dimension of attractiveness was measured using 5 items adapted from Herath et al. (2025), which include both the physical appearance and overall appeal of the influencer. The 9 items by Sachdeva (2015) were used to assess the consumer decision-making process at 9 points using various stages of the consumer decision-making journey, such as problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and post-purchase behaviour.

Then, the collected data from the questionnaire was

analysed with SmartPLS SEM (Structural Equation Modelling), a robust statistical technique applied to evaluate various relationships between variables (Hair et al., 2017). The choice of SmartPLS SEM to analyse reflective and formative constructs and to measure direct and indirect effects of variables in the model was justified because of its suitability. According to Hair et al. (2017), this method can be utilised to test hypotheses concerning the influence of influencers' trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness on the consumer decision process. Such comprehensive assessment of the measurement model fit, as well as the identification of key drivers of consumer behaviour, is extremely beneficial for testing the proposed hypotheses in this study and for preventing potential pitfalls in model implementation.

A sample of 509 university students was obtained, comprising 253 males (49.7%) and 256 females (50.3%). There were age differences among the participants, with 185 students (36.4%), 211 students (41.4%), and 113 students (22.2%) aged between 18 and 22, 23 and 26, and 27 and older, respectively.

## Analysis

**Table 1: Factor Loadings, AVE, and Rho\_c for Constructs**

Constructs	Factor Loadings	AVE	Rho_c
A1 <- Attractiveness	0.734	0.622	0.891
A2 <- Attractiveness	0.860		
A3 <- Attractiveness	0.772		
A4 <- Attractiveness	0.799		
A5 <- Attractiveness	0.773		
CDM1 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.750	0.641	0.941
CDM2 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.791		
CDM3 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.773		
CDM4 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.764		
CDM5 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.785		
CDM6 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.817		
CDM7 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.849		
CDM8 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.789		
CDM9 <- Consumer Decision Making Process	0.879		
E1 <- Expertise	0.771	0.645	0.879
E2 <- Expertise	0.751		
E3 <- Expertise	0.839		
E4 <- Expertise	0.848		
T1 <- Trust Worthiness	0.673	0.572	0.869
T2 <- Trust Worthiness	0.752		
T3 <- Trust Worthiness	0.752		
T4 <- Trust Worthiness	0.719		
T5 <- Trust Worthiness	0.872		

The table presented is comprehensive to include a description of the measurement model for several constructs used in the analysis, including their corresponding factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (Rho\_c) values. The constructs used in the study are evaluated based on these metrics for the validity and reliability of the constructs. It examines the constructs under consideration, namely Attractiveness, Consumer Decision Making Process, Expertise, and Trustworthiness, all of them have more than one observed variable or indicator.

Based upon the variable attractiveness construct, there are 5 observed indicators (A1 through A5). The factor loadings for these indicators fall between 0.734 and 0.860, and when they are combined, they have a strong correlation with the latent construct. A good measurement model is considered if factor loadings are over 0.7 and the indicators are highly reliable in indicating the underlying construct. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for Attractiveness is 0.622, which is more than the usually accepted threshold of 0.5. This means that the construct explains more than 62% of its indicators, explaining variance. Finally, the Composite Reliability (Rho\_c) for Attractiveness is 0.891, a value above the accepted value of 0.7, therefore indicating high internal consistency and reliability of this construct.

The Consumer Decision-Making process is a complex construct with nine indicators: (CDM1 to CDM9). These indicators are well correlated with the latent variable and have factor loadings in the range of 0.750 – 0.879, which are generally high. Having an AVE of 0.641 for the CDM construct suggests that this construct explains

more than 64% of the variance in its indicators, i.e., it is above the accepted threshold of 0.5. Moreover, the composite reliability (Rho\_c) for CDM is of extraordinary magnitude at 0.941 and much higher than the benchmark value of 0.7. This suggests that the CDM construct is highly reliable and internally consistent.

Four observed variables are used to represent the Expertise construct (E1 through E4). The factor loadings for these variables vary from 0.75 to 0.848 and indicate a moderate to strong correlation between the observed variables and the latent construct. The acceptable threshold of 0.5 is exceeded as well, with the AVE being 0.645, also representing more than 64% of the variance that is explained in the construct's indicators. The Composite Reliability (Rho\_c) for the Expertise construct is 0.879, which exceeds the required threshold of 0.7, meaning that the Expertise construct has relatively high internal consistency and reliability.

Five observed variables are involved in the Trust Worthiness Construct (T1 through T5), and the factor loadings vary from 0.673 to 0.872. Although the loading for T1 (0.673) is slightly below the commonly used cutoff of 0.7, the remaining loadings are greater than 0.7, so the construct is still almost surely reliable. While the AVE for Trustworthiness of 0.572 is above the threshold of 0.5, it is less than the AVE values of the other constructs. While this still implies that the construct may predict a considerable amount of the variance in its indicators, it does not suggest that the measure is theoretically sound. The alpha of the Composite Reliability (Rho\_c) for Trustworthiness (0.869) exceeds the threshold of 0.7 so that it is functional and internally consistent.

**Table 2: Correlation**

	Consumer Decision-Making Process	Attractiveness	Expertise	Trust Worthiness
Consumer Decision-Making Process	1			
Attractiveness	1.012**	1		
Expertise	0.991**	0.941**	1	
Trust Worthiness	0.384**	0.396**	0.368**	1

The correlation coefficients between the four constructs in terms of Consumer Decision-Making Process, Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness are presented in Table 2. The strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables are measured

by correlation coefficients. Values are in this range (-1 to +1) and indicate a strong positive relationship with values closer to 1 and a weak or negative relationship with values closer to 0. These two constructs are correlated at 1.012, which is above 1. This is an exceptionally high positive

relationship, and so the exceedance of 1 suggests some degree of nonlinearity or some form of curvilinearity. A high association between Consumer Decision-Making and Attractiveness is demonstrated by this, as the increase in one usually corresponds with the increase in the other.

Consumer Decision-Making Process and Expertise: 0.991 denotes the extremely strong positive relationship between these two constructs. It is close to 1, which means that increases in the Consumer Decision-Making Process increase with increases in the Expertise. Therefore, in this sense, those who derive more from the decision-making process will have more expertise. The moderate positive relationship between Consumer Decision-Making Process and Trustworthiness is indicated by its correlation of 0.384. The second parallel suggests that if there is any relationship between levels of trustworthiness and levels of decision-making effectiveness, then it is weaker than the previous two correlations.

A correlation of 0.941 means that there is a very strong positive relationship between Attractiveness and Expertise. Expertise tends to increase when Attractiveness does, indicating an extremely high degree of interrelatedness between these two constructs. The value of correlation between Attractiveness and trustworthiness is 0.396, meaning a (moderately) positive relationship. This suggests a weak relationship between higher attractiveness and higher trustworthiness than the one with Expertise or Consumer Decision-Making Process. According to this, the Expertise–Trust Worthiness correlation of 0.368 is weak to moderately positive. This indicates that there is not a very strong relationship between being more expert and being trusted, but those who appear to be more trusted are somewhat more likely to be more expert.

**Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)**

Construct's	HTMT
Consumer Decision Making Process <-> Attractiveness	1.011
Expertise <-> Attractiveness	0.944
Expertise <-> Consumer Decision Making Process	0.989
Trust Worthiness <-> Attractiveness	0.392
Trust Worthiness <-> Consumer Decision Making Process	0.380
Trust Worthiness <-> Expertise	0.365

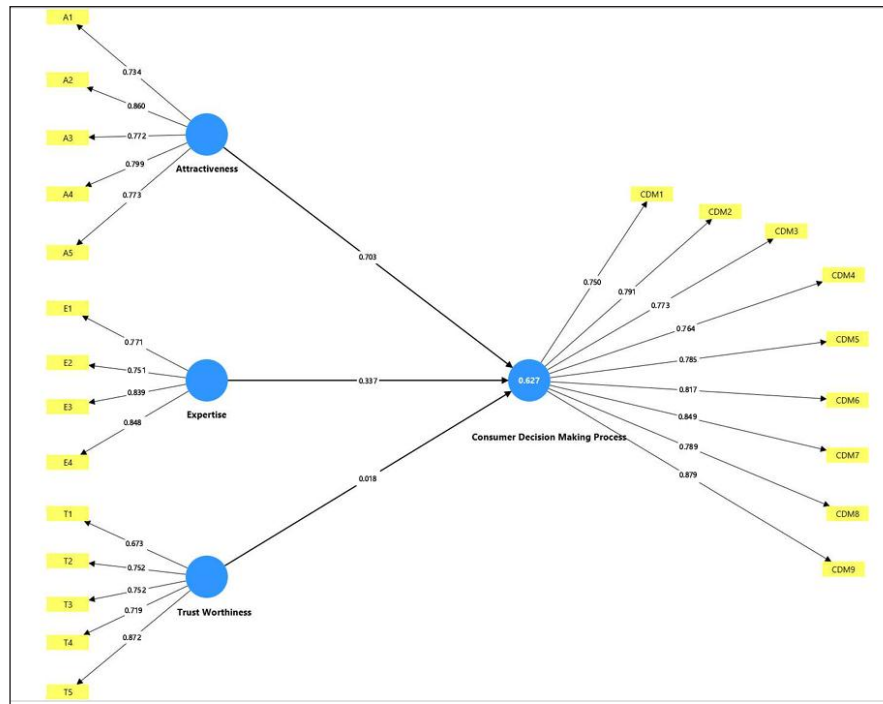
A criterion for evaluating discriminant validity between constructs is the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). It

helps address the question of whether the constructs are distinguishable enough from each other. If the HTMT value is greater than 0.85 (or 0.90 in some cases), the constructs have a potential discriminant validity problem as they are too similar. Attractiveness <-> Consumer Decision-Making Process (The HTMT value is 1.011, which is slightly above 1.0). This implies a great similarity between these two constructs. However, such relationships are distinct from one another, and if not, that could indicate a problem with discriminant validity. HTMT value of 0.944 suggests that expertise and attractiveness are correlated very close to the threshold of 0.85, which is another way of saying that expertise and attractiveness depend very highly, albeit not perfectly. This may suggest that these two constructs may not be sufficiently different, and this may contaminate the validity of the discriminant.

Consumer Decision-Making Process <-> Expertise: The value 0.989 of HTMT is very close to 1, which means that these two constructs are highly similar. This indicates that Expertise and the Consumer Decision process may not be that distinctly different and may have large aspects of conceptual overlap. The HTMT value of 0.392 is less than the recommended threshold, which indicates that Trust Worthiness and Attractiveness are distinct constructs not overlap very overlapped. The result offers good discriminant validity between the two constructs. The t value of 0.380 also confirms the distinctness of Trust Worthiness and Consumer Decision-Making Process, which indicates that they are conceptually different constructs and do not share much in common. The HTMT value of 0.365 is more than enough to underscore the fact that trustworthiness is separate from Expertise, as this value is less than the threshold of concern for discriminant validity.

**Table 4: Path Coefficient**

Constructs	Original Sample (O)	P-Values
Attractiveness -> Consumer Decision-Making Process	0.703	0.000
Expertise -> Consumer Decision-Making Process	0.337	0.000
Trustworthiness -> Consumer Decision-Making Process	0.018	0.000



**Fig. 2: Path Coefficient**

The path coefficients ( $\beta$  values) and their p values for the relationships between the constructs are presented in Table 4. Path coefficients provide the strength and direction of relationships between two variables, and p-values show the degree of statistical significance of the relationships. Consumer Decision-Making Process: The path coefficient of 0.703 is a relatively strong positive relationship, and the p-value (0.000) is statistically significant. This implies that Attractiveness has a strong effect on the Consumer decision-making process; the higher the Attractiveness is, the greater is the likelihood of consumer decision-making. Consumer Decision-Making Process  $\rightarrow$  Expertise: path coefficient 0.337, moderate positive relationship, p-value 0.000, statistically significant. Attractiveness has a considerable, but somewhat weaker effect on the Consumer Decision-Making Process than does Expertise. That is, expertise makes more informed decisions more likely, but the influence is smaller than that of Attractiveness. Consumer Decision-Making Process  $\rightarrow$  Trustworthiness: This path coefficient is 0.018 with an overwhelmingly weak relationship, and its p-value is 0.000, which is statistically significant. Though statistically significant, the tiny path coefficient shows trustworthiness has an insignificant effect on the Consumer decision-making process.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides important insights about the crucial roles social media influencers play in influencing the purchasing decisions of university students in Saudi Arabia. Attractiveness and Expertise play the biggest role in the consumer decision-making process. It is consistent with extant literature on the influence of the character of the influencer on the consumption behaviour of the target in such a way that people tend to follow the influencer whose looks are alluring and which the influencer exhibits expertise in certain departments (Jamil et al., 2024). Thus, these two influencers' dimensions of influence are important in the context of how the students in Saudi Arabia respond when they see the influencer's content on social media platforms.

In particular, attractiveness is an important factor that affects students' perception and subsequent behaviour. The more attractive the influencer is, the more students are likely to have faith in the influencer's product recommendations and include them whenever making a decision. As prior research has demonstrated, attractiveness has a strong association with influencer persuasiveness in marketing contexts Shuqair et al. (2024), the finding is consistent with this. In short, it

implies that when students in Saudi Arabia choose a product, they may privilege the product's visual appeal and charismatic appeal concerning its value. From a more practical perspective, marketers should be able to leverage influencers with an existing large audience within the student demographic and engage with their target audience through affiliation.

While the power of expertise is not as strong as attractiveness, it is still heavily influential on the way consumers behave. Students will be more influenced by influencers considered knowledgeable or skilful in certain subjects, such as fashion, beauty, or technology (Al-Ajlan et al., 2022). Expertise adds weight to the need to match the influencer marketing campaign with influencers who have knowledge-themed expertise that resonates with the target audience. Therefore, the students in Saudi Arabia might be more inclined to take action on the influencer's suggestions and recommendations because the influencers are considered more credible sources of information. As a consequence, marketers must pick influencers who possess enough expertise within their area of specialisation to help increase the chances of a successful conversion sale.

Moreover, the study finds that trustworthiness has a moderate influence on the path of consumer decision-making, however, with a lesser influence than attractiveness and expertise. Especially in the online and social media environment, recommendations authenticity is usually in question, and the factors of trust become much more important (Han & Balabanis, 2024). While the direct influence of trustworthiness in this study is not as great as the cohesiveness and identity compared due to its relatively little influence on students' brand loyalty and relationship with brands in lifelong, it is very important at this point. As such, those influencers who are deemed authentic and trustworthy toward students are most likely to develop a closer rapport with their audience, resulting in recurrent purchases and eventually, longer-lasting impact on the purchasing behaviours of students. Therefore, it might be argued that although not being immediately impactful, trustworthiness plays an important role in building consumer relationships.

In addition, the overlap between Attractiveness, Expertise, and Consumer Decision-Making Process shows that these constructs are interrelated, and together they might be contributing to the students'

purchasing decisions. The strong correlations and path coefficients indicate that university students do not see influencer characteristics separately, but also view them collectively. The insight behind this view comes from the fact that all these factors are intertwined, having the ability to influence purchasing behaviour for influencers who flourish in multiple dimensions. This finding reinforces previous studies, which demonstrate that the allure of social media influencers increases with the degree of their attractiveness as well as expertise (Engel et al., 2024). Thus, two types of influencers are more effective in influencing students' purchasing decisions: those who are well-endowed with visual appeal and domain expertise, but not with others; and those who are only good in one of the above aspects.

In addition, the role of social media influencers in Saudi Arabia also follows the global trends of increased social media impact on consumer behaviour. Further evidence to support this can be seen in the growth of social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, which have become more and more popular among young adults and university students (Saad et al., 2025). This study's findings are in line with the global research that places influencers' key role in dictating how consumers see and act after having seen an influencer. These results, in the context of Saudi Arabia, where social media is widespread, indicate that students are increasingly relying on influencers for recommendations of products, thereby changing the traditional way of consumers making decisions. This indicates the mechanism of the change in how students interact with brands from traditional advertising methods to more personalised ones, driven by other people via influencers.

The findings conclude with a call for marketers to tailor their markets to the peculiarities of the student demographic in Saudi Arabia. The study shows that students take into account the attractiveness and expertise of the social media influencers. Because of this, brands that want to reach university students should seek to work with influencers that have a strong online presence, but even more important, have a deep knowledge about the products or services they promote. Great visuals and expertise will be determinants to drive higher engagement and sales from influencers, and brands can take advantage of the mass market potential from this demographic. These findings are important in designing more successful

influencer marketing strategies that reach out to Arabic university students in Saudi Arabia.

## CONCLUSION

This study's results offer a profound understanding of the impact of social media influencers' purchasing effect over university students in Saudi Arabia. Attractiveness and Expertise turn out to be the main elements that direct the students' decision-making process. Attractiveness has the strongest impact compared to Expertise. Though trustworthiness was important, it had relatively no emphasis. For example, if physical attractiveness and perceived knowledge about certain product categories attract college students, then they would choose an influencer who fits this description. Additionally, these factors are linked in an interdependent manner to emphasise the intricate manner in which students determine whom to follow and from whom to make purchase.

The study highlights the significance of influencer characteristics on consumer behaviour in social media marketing. The findings suggest that brands need to work with influencers who have a strong visual appeal and in-depth knowledge of their niche to maximise impact. First, these are characteristics that not only help to increase students' trust in the content but also lead to the success of influencer marketing campaigns targeting university students. Since there are strong associations between most of these variables, marketers of audiences in Saudi Arabia must take into account the multi-dimensional nature of influencer appeal in designing marketing strategies aimed at students.

## Implications

The contribution of this study is significant for marketers who intend to leverage influencer marketing with university students in Saudi Arabia. Attractiveness emerged as the most paramount role, indicating that if brands bother with the set of targets, the influencers with good visuals and a vast following are the trendsetters to follow. For this, social media platforms with an eye for visuals would be recommended, such as Instagram, are recommended. Furthermore, the role of Expertise emphasises that students tend to rely more on recommendations by 'experts' of a certain product

category, as opposed to those who are not perceived as such. To boost consumer trust and persuade purchasing decisions, marketers should promote amplifying networks that fit both aesthetic appeal and credibility factors in relevant industries.

In addition, the findings of the study also highlight the potential long-term effects of trustworthiness, although its immediate effects are a bit weaker. Trust will not drastically influence the first buying decision, but it certainly plays a significant role in branding loyalty and customer retention. Brands that create a platform for real relationships among influencers and his/her audience will see the consumer coming back and revisiting the website to purchase products.

Influencer marketing strategy, therefore, bears testimony to the need not only for nurturing trust in marketing strategies but the need for doing this even more when you're going after student populations that champion authenticity and transparency. The results also suggest the rising importance of social media influencers in forming the purchasing preferences of young adults in Saudi Arabia. Given the trend toward the use of social media platforms and the fact that university students are among active users of social media platforms, influencer marketing is becoming more integral part of brand strategies. As companies begin to understand that influencers are gaining more power with their endorsements, they need to adapt their marketing tactics accordingly. According to the findings, brands seeking to leverage influencer collaborations will be well-positioned to succeed as segments of the dynamic and quickly changing market when the focus is on a balance of attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness.

## Limitations

The study provides valuable insights but also needs to acknowledge several limitations. A limitation of this one is based on the fact that participants' responses are self-reported. The characteristics of influencers that are perceived by students are subjective, and it comes down to personal choices or social desirability. Consequently, the reported effects of these factors on the students' purchasing decisions may not reflect students' actual behaviour in the real world, unfortunately. Moreover, because the study is cross-sectional, inferences about causality cannot be drawn. While some correlations

and path relationships were found between influencer characteristics and purchasing decisions, the associations cannot be said to be causal. With regards to the determinants of consumers' behaviour in response to influence, future research utilising longitudinal or experimental approaches would be expedient to ascertain causality and further research the mechanisms through which influencer characteristics impact consumers' behaviour over time. Additionally, the focus of the sample was just university students in Saudi Arabia, therefore, the generalisability of the results to other populations or geographic areas may additionally be limited.

### Future Directions

Longitudinal studies could examine how student behaviour towards particular influencer traits over time and if there is a shift in students' preferences throughout their university experience. Otherwise, other factors such as the effect of cultural values on purchasing decisions and their impact on peer groups could shed more light on the understanding of the dynamics of consumers and social media influencers in various cultural contexts.

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