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Demystifying the path from posts to purchases: A mixed-methods examination of how social media influencers sway users' attitudes and online buying intention

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers have become fundamental actors in shaping consumer decision-making, yet how their attributes translate into consumer attitudes and purchase intentions remains underexplored in emerging, trust-driven, and fragile economies. This study investigates how influencer attributes, namely, credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality, affect consumers' attitudes toward social media influencers and, ultimately, their online buying intentions. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model and Source Credibility Theory (SCT), this study adopts a mixed-methods approach with questionnaire data from 402 Lebanese consumers analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling, complemented by qualitative insights that enrich the interpretation of consumer evaluations. The quantitative results reveal that attitudes toward social media influencers serve as a mediating mechanism linking influencer attributes to online buying intention, with trustworthiness and information quality demonstrating comparatively stronger effects. The qualitative findings further contextualize these relationships by revealing that expertise is interpreted as practical, demonstrable competence rather than credential-based authority, while trustworthiness is grounded in authenticity and relational interaction. These insights advance theory by extending SOR and SCT into influencer marketing and methodologically by combining quantitative and qualitative evidence. Practically, the study guides marketers in Lebanon and similar emerging markets on selecting and leveraging influencers who foster trust, engagement, and sustainable consumer loyalty.

1. Introduction

Social media has transformed how people communicate, share information, and consume content (Tupikovskaja-Omovic & Tyler, 2020). Within this landscape, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as powerful opinion leaders whose recommendations shape consumer perceptions and purchase behavior (Rajkumar et al., 2022). Unlike traditional endorsers, SMIs engage in ongoing, interactive communication with their audiences by sharing personal experiences, product endorsements, and lifestyle content. This fosters stronger parasocial bonds and higher levels of trust (Yasar & Polat, 2022). Consequently, consumers often perceive influencers as relatable peers rather than merely corporate spokespersons. This makes influencer marketing a potent alternative to traditional advertising (Sucena & Cury, 2024).

In Lebanon, this phenomenon takes on additional significance, where word-of-mouth and influencer-based interactions significantly shape customer responsiveness, highlighting the salience of relational and trust-oriented communication mechanisms in the local market (Sarkis et al., 2025). In such a context, SMIs are often perceived as trusted sources of information, bridging the gap between brands and consumers. For businesses operating in Lebanon, SMIs are increasingly relied upon to generate consumer engagement and shape purchasing preferences (Jabbour Al Maalouf et al., 2025; Sarkis et al., 2025). However, despite the rapid rise of influencer marketing in Lebanon, empirical studies remain scarce, and little is known about how Lebanese consumers evaluate influencers based on key antecedents such as credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality.

This gap is important because findings from other markets may not

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directly apply to Lebanon's fragile socio-economic environment, where consumers rely heavily on authenticity and interpersonal trust when making purchase decisions. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how Lebanese consumers perceive and respond to SMIs, focusing on the extent to which influencer characteristics shape consumer attitudes and online purchase intentions.

Furthermore, while prior influencer marketing studies (e.g., [Batra et al., 2022](#); [Coutinho et al., 2023](#); [Ding, 2024](#); [Ilieva et al., 2024](#); [Ismagilova et al., 2020](#); [Lim et al., 2017](#); [Lou & Yuan, 2019](#); [Martiningsih & Setyawan, 2022](#); [Masuda et al., 2022](#); [Sarkis et al., 2024](#)) have predominantly relied on quantitative designs, such approaches offer limited insight into how consumers themselves interpret and make sense of influencer attributes in context. In fragile and trust-sensitive markets such as Lebanon, characterized by consumer risk sensitivity ([Bou-Hamad, 2026](#); [Jabbour Al Maalouf et al., 2025](#)), credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness are not merely abstract constructs but lived evaluations shaped by economic uncertainty and cultural proximity ([Sarkis et al., 2024](#)). A qualitative exploration is therefore necessary to uncover the meanings, cues, and evaluative processes through which Lebanese consumers assess social media influencers. By incorporating a qualitative phase alongside structural modeling, this study addresses an interpretive gap in the literature and provides a deeper, contextually grounded understanding of how influencer attributes translate into attitudes and online buying intentions.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent do SMI antecedents affect online buying intention? Three sub-questions are added: (1) To what extent do SMI antecedents affect attitudes toward SMIs? (2) To what extent do attitudes toward SMIs, underlined by their antecedents, mediate online brand buying intentions? (3) How do Lebanese consumers qualitatively interpret and evaluate, from their lived perspectives, influencer credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality in shaping their attitudes and online buying intentions?

This study is grounded in the complementary use of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and Source Credibility Theory (SCT), which together provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining influencer-driven persuasion. SCT explains why specific influencer attributes function as persuasive cues by shaping perceptions of message validity and source reliability. The SOR framework, in turn, explains how these attributes operate as external stimuli that trigger internal psychological evaluations (consumer attitudes) and subsequently lead to behavioral responses (online buying intention). By integrating SCT's source-based logic with SOR's process-oriented perspective, this study captures both the content of persuasion and the mechanism through which it influences consumer behavior. This integrated approach is particularly suitable for the Lebanese context, where heightened uncertainty and institutional distrust amplify consumers' reliance on credible sources and attitudinal processing in online decision-making. Accordingly, this study focuses on credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality as the core influencer attributes through which persuasion operates in digital environments, particularly in trust-sensitive contexts such as Lebanon.

By situating influencer marketing within the Lebanese context, this research addresses several gaps in the influencer marketing literature and makes three key contributions. First, it extends existing literature by applying both the SOR framework and SCT to explain how influencer characteristics trigger psychological evaluations and shape online buying intentions. This study adds theoretical value by applying those theories to a fragile economic context, demonstrating that credibility-based mechanisms are not uniform across markets but are conditioned by economic instability and cultural proximity. Second, it contributes methodologically by employing a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative interviews to capture both the generalizable patterns and the contextual nuances of consumer responses. This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality

operate in practice. Third, it provides practical insights for marketers and brands in Lebanon and similar fragile economies, identifying the influencer attributes most capable of fostering trust, positive attitudes, and ultimately purchase intentions. Together, these contributions advance theory, methodology, and practice, while enriching our understanding of influencer marketing in underexplored cultural contexts.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The next section reviews the relevant literature on SMIs, consumer attitudes, and online buying intention, and develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines the mixed-methods research design, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques. The subsequent section presents the quantitative and qualitative results. The discussion section interprets the findings in light of existing research. Finally, the paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attitude and online buying intention

Consumers' attitudinal constituents are positive predictors of customers' purchase intentions. Attitude strongly predicts behavioral intention to get involved with ads encountered on social media platforms, alongside subjective norms. Likewise, the attitudinal responses toward social media play a moderating and predictive role in the association regarding the relationship between psychological and environmental triggers and online buying tendencies among social media users ([Kimiagari & Malafe, 2021](#)).

In turn, contemporary buying patterns have been influenced by increased digital adoption, from the type of products depicted online over social media platforms, and how much time is spent on reading reviews or writing them to following SMIs. [Korkmaz and Seyhan \(2021\)](#) indicated that online commerce is growing faster as digital platforms are being used by consumers to purchase a broader range of items, such as food and furniture, to meet their daily needs. Online shoppers are mostly swayed by suggestions based on reviews and discounts since online purchasing is known for its dynamic pricing structures ([Pšurný et al., 2024](#)). Shoppers' online purchase intentions exercise a positive influence on their online buying behavior ([Lina et al., 2022](#)). Further, several scholars proved that online brand purchasing behavior is very common among young generations, as a response to the surging trend of social networks and online convenience ([Gulfraz et al., 2022](#); [Liu et al., 2021](#)). The practicality of social media platforms is entailed as a novel pathway for businesses to render their marketing efforts ever since social media plays a pivotal part in swaying buying choices, like online brand buying ([Dwivedi et al., 2021](#)). Online platforms' ads positively influence customers' online buying intent and buying behavior. Also, [Han et al. \(2022\)](#) identify digital products as having higher levels of social media acceptance and online purchase intention compared to products that are not digital.

2.2. Social media influencers

SMIs are delineated as a category of digital content producers entailed by their massive audience, exclusive identity, as well as steady partnerships with advertisement guarantors. To make a living, they endorse labeled products and expertise to their audience of followers via informative, inspirational, and advice-filled promotional messages ([Priti et al., 2020](#)). Their convincing way of addressing topics is often seen as more "authentic" or "organic" than old-style methods of paid publicity ever since SMIs' brand promotion is effortlessly blended into their current visual, textual, and narrative content arsenals ([Bastrygina et al., 2024](#)). Though they emerged in the digital age, SMIs' methods are rather old school, dating back to the very first kind of advertising, which is word of mouth. Because of their widespread cultural appeal, influencers'

communication tactics capitalize on the idea that they are more genuine or trustworthy sources of information and advice.

SIMs often have a favorable influence on consumerism, increasing the likelihood of buying the goods they partnered with brands to provide (Comicho et al., 2025). Since many people pay great attention to the opinions of SIMs, brands may benefit from their evaluations and remarks in increasing brand recognition and connecting with prospective consumers (Galdón-Salvador et al., 2024). Consumers' perceptions of the items' value and quality are induced by influencers' remarks and reviews posted on their social media platforms, which serve as external cues that elicit a reaction of purchase intent. With this level of precision, SIMs may build trust with a business by creating content that resonates with a certain audience. Lim et al. (2017) argue that, in contrast to famous people, who might appeal to a wide variety of fans, influencers tend to have a core group of people who share their opinions and views. Because of this laser-like intensity and emotional link, SIMs' endorsements of products may have a profound impact. Mitchel (2021) evidenced that the majority of users on social media listen to suggestions from influential people before trying a new business. At regular intervals, users also do online searches for the items that influencers actively advocate (Comicho et al., 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, SIMs represent a distinct category of communicators within SCT because their credibility is relationally constructed through ongoing interaction rather than institutionally assigned. Unlike traditional endorsers whose authority derives from celebrity status or institutional affiliation, SIMs build credibility through sustained engagement, perceived authenticity, and parasocial bonds. This makes them particularly suitable for examining source-based persuasion in digital environments.

3. Theoretical background

This study is grounded on the SCT and the SOR paradigm. First, the SCT explains how message persuasiveness depends on the communicator's perceived credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness. In digital contexts, SIMs embody these attributes by shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors through their content and endorsements. Unlike traditional advertising, where credibility cues are institution-driven, influencer marketing relies on personal and relational credibility developed with followers. This study adopts source credibility theory as a foundation for examining how SIM attributes influence consumer responses. Second, the SOR paradigm provides a useful lens for this research. In the SOR model, stimuli are external factors. Here, influencer attributes such as credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality are the stimuli. These shape the organism, represented by consumer attitudes toward SIMs, which subsequently drive the response, operationalized as online brand buying intention. This approach has been applied successfully in digital marketing and online consumer behavior studies (Sun & Xing, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020).

4. Hypothesis development

The four antecedents selected for this study reflect key dimensions identified in the literature. Credibility is a global evaluation of the influencer's believability (Hu et al., 2019). Expertise reflects knowledge and practical ability to provide useful product guidance (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Trustworthiness refers to perceived honesty and reliability (Zhang et al., 2020). Information quality addresses the accuracy, completeness, and usefulness of content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The selection of those antecedents is theoretically driven rather than exploratory. These attributes represent the core dimensions through which source-based persuasion operates in digital environments. Credibility and trustworthiness capture relational and moral evaluations of the influencer, while expertise reflects perceived competence and knowledge. Information quality extends SCT by accounting for message-level characteristics that are especially salient in social commerce contexts,

where consumers rely on influencers not only as endorsers but also as information intermediaries. Together, these constructs form a parsimonious yet comprehensive representation of influencer-related stimuli within the SOR framework, minimizing conceptual overlap while allowing differential effects to be tested.

4.1. Users' Attitude toward SIMs and SIMs' perceived credibility

The credibility of a source is significant in determining the persuasiveness of a message and is used extensively in determining the efficacy of endorsements. According to social psychologists, source credibility is the combination of an audience's trust in the speaker and the veracity of the message (Hu et al., 2019). By internalizing the claims made by reputable sources, customers tend to form favorable impressions of a brand, and these claims have the power to alter consumers' beliefs and actions. This occurs when the receiver internalizes the beliefs, values, and perspectives of another person when the source is seen as trustworthy and exhibits actions that align with the receiver's own set of principles (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). SIMs' credibility determines their persuasive power and consequently consumer attitude toward SIMs. Further to this, Liu and Zheng (2024) state that the informational value of SIMs' posting, alongside credibility, positively affects their affiliative ties with their followers, swaying them to both brand purchase intention and evaluation of the brand's credibility. In this setting, the user's intent to buy online is affiliated with SIMs' credibility, as well as brand equity (Coutinho et al., 2023; Pervaiz et al., 2023).

Within SCT, credibility is a central determinant of persuasive power, as message believability drives internalization. From an SOR perspective, credibility acts as a stimulus that fosters favorable cognitive evaluations (organism), thereby improving attitudes toward the influencer. Consequently, the succeeding hypothesis is suggested:

H1. SIM credibility is positively associated with consumer attitudes toward SIMs.

4.2. Users' Attitude toward SIMs and SIMs' expertise

According to Kareem and Venugopal (2023), SIM expertise improves purchase intention, with attitudes towards brand credibility mediating this relationship. In addition, Ashraf et al. (2023) found that expertise is linked to fostering parasocial relationships with followers, indirectly influencing purchase intentions (Ladhari et al., 2020). SIMs' level of expertise and understanding of a product is directly proportional to the amount of time they spend using it. Taking advantage of this, SIMs showcase first-hand experience with the products, share reviews and tutorials, and show how they use the goods in real-life situations (Rahmi et al., 2021). In this setting, the capacity of SIMs to provide accurate and trustworthy information to their following audience enhances their trustworthiness and strengthens their connection with their followers. Following Lim et al. (2017), SIMs have stronger persuasive power. Plus, consumers' perceptions of a product and their intentions to buy it, whether for themselves or as gifts, are both influenced by the level of knowledge about the product. In addition, when people think that SIMs don't know much about the products they endorse and aren't connected to the information they share, it makes them feel bad about themselves, which in turn makes them think poorly of the products and less likely to buy them (Lim et al., 2017). Further observations assume that all of the perceived expertise, similarity of SIMs, and their content attractiveness positively affect online customers' buying intentions (Batra et al., 2022; Martiningsih & Setyawan, 2022; Masuda et al., 2022).

Within SCT, expertise refers to the extent to which a communicator is perceived as knowledgeable and capable of making valid assertions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Unlike trustworthiness, which emphasizes honesty, expertise reflects competence grounded in experience and demonstrated skill. Prior influencer marketing research shows that followers evaluate influencers' expertise through cues such as product

demonstrations, technical comparisons, and the provision of practical tips (Hu et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). From an S-O-R perspective, perceived expertise functions as a stimulus that activates consumers' cognitive evaluations (the organism stage). When audiences believe that an influencer genuinely understands a product category, they are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward both the influencer and the promoted brand (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This effect may be particularly salient in Lebanon, where economic volatility fosters consumer skepticism and makes localized, hands-on expertise a decisive cue for persuasion. Thereby, hypothesis two is postulated:

H2. SMI perceived expertise is positively associated with consumer attitudes toward SMIs.

4.3. Users' Attitude toward SMIs and SMIs' trustworthiness

Credibility is how consumers view the endorser's honesty, integrity, and credibility, as well as how much faith they have in the endorser's motives, while presenting the most convincing reasons. If an SMI can be relied on to offer accurate information, the message is more widely believed and accepted (Zhang et al., 2020). Digital celebrities, such as SMIs, are often seen by customers as more reliable than their conventional counterparts. This makes sense considering that SMIs are seen as more approachable and genuine by fans compared to other celebrities (Schouten et al., 2022) and that customers generally find SMIs to be more open in their information delivery (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). However, as previously stated, consumers may view SMIs with skepticism when they learn that they are being compensated to promote a product. They may assume that the SMIs are only endorsing the product for the financial gain associated with sharing the info, rather than because they truly believe in the product. Thus, the credibility of a digital influencer's source is most strongly correlated with how trustworthy they are, and the trustworthiness of an endorser is a key component in the success of endorsements. Therefore, SMIs have a better chance of modifying customers' attitudes and increasing purchase intention when they are trusted (Ismagilova et al., 2020). When SMIs are seen as more knowledgeable and reliable, their followers tend to follow their lead and believe what they say (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Rathnayaka and Lakshika (2023) postulate that the perceived trustworthiness of influencers stands as the most impactful factor towards consumers' purchase intentions, aligning with the findings of Lefina and Hidayat (2022) on SMIs' trustworthiness, suggesting that it positively impacts brand engagement, as well as the intention to buy recommended products and joining emerging evidence of Ding (2024) demonstrating that Gen-Zers' perceived high trustworthiness toward SMIs positively influence their brand value perception and thereby, their purchase intents.

SCT identifies trustworthiness as the honesty and integrity of the source, a critical component of credibility. In SOR terms, trustworthiness operates as a stimulus of relational reassurance, lowering skepticism and generating positive affective responses (organism) that enhance consumer attitudes. Consequently, the third hypothesis is suggested:

H3. SMI trustworthiness is positively associated with consumer attitudes toward SMIs.

4.4. Users' Attitude toward SMIs and SMIs' information quality

Customers tend to purchase a product when they have all the info they need, which is why information quality is important for organizations. When there is comprehensive information and descriptions available, people are more likely to be interested in purchasing the items. Despite the strong presence currently of electronic media (e.g., e-payments) to foster e-commerce, based on the theory of information richness, individuals' detailed information remains the most powerful marketing strategy. Buyers' certainty, and their likelihood of buying the products by extension, are boosted by very comprehensive information.

Customers will be far more satisfied and motivated to purchase if they are bestowed with qualified information by a marketer. Following Lou and Yuan (2019), the credibility, brand recognition, and purchase intent of an SMI's audience are all affected by the quality of the content the influencer posts. Plus, Ilieva et al. (2024) argue that consumers tend to favor tailored SMIs' informative content that meets their preferences, promoting a robust association with labels, thereby rendering their brand buying choices.

Information quality aligns with SCT through the perception of message validity and content strength. In SOR, high-quality, relevant information functions as a stimulus that reduces uncertainty, enabling favorable attitudes toward the influencer and their recommendations. Hence, based on previous studies and the theoretical framework of this study, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. SMI information quality is positively associated with consumer attitudes toward SMIs.

4.5. Users' Attitude toward SMIs and online buying intention

Tian et al. (2023) intend that social media users' perceived similarity and wishful identification towards the influencers they follow positively influence their assimilative comparison emotions of optimism, which in turn, further affect their motivations to follow SMIs for self-development, thus, boosting their brand attitude and engagement to make online purchases. This joins the findings of Torres et al. (2019), entailing that consumption habits and attitudes towards brands of online users are persuaded by influencers' appeal, in the settings of like ability and familiarity of SMIs. Also, Al-Sous et al. (2023) state that SMIs' trustworthiness and quality of information antecedents sway buyers' opinions towards a brand, consequently rendering their purchase choices. Further, brand attitude acts as a key variable that influences brand-related intentions.

Integrating SCT and SOR, attitudes represent the organism stage mediating between influencer stimuli and consumer behavioral responses. This pathway reflects how source-related antecedents influence downstream intentions: when users form positive attitudes toward SMIs, these evaluations translate into stronger online buying intentions. Thus, the fifth hypothesis is formulated:

H5. Users' attitude toward SMIs mediates the association between SMIs' antecedents and users' online brand buying intention.

Built upon the findings of previous studies, the theoretical framework, and the hypotheses, Fig. 1 illustrates the associations between all studied variables.

5. Research context

The Lebanese context is theoretically significant rather than incidental. In fragile economies characterized by institutional distrust, currency instability, and constrained purchasing power, consumers rely less on formal market signals and more on interpersonal and relational cues when making purchase decisions (Bou-Hamad, 2026; Rahmi et al., 2021). Under such conditions, influencers do not merely function as promotional agents but as informal validators who reduce perceived risk and uncertainty. This makes attributes such as expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality more salient than symbolic popularity or celebrity status. Consequently, Lebanon offers a critical context to test whether established persuasion mechanisms embedded in SCT and SOR hold under conditions of economic fragility and heightened consumer skepticism. The combination of economic volatility, rising consumer skepticism, and high digital media use creates conditions where trust and expertise are especially critical. In such environments, consumers are cautious with their spending and rely heavily on credible and relevant information before committing to a purchase (Jabbour Al Maalouf et al., 2025).

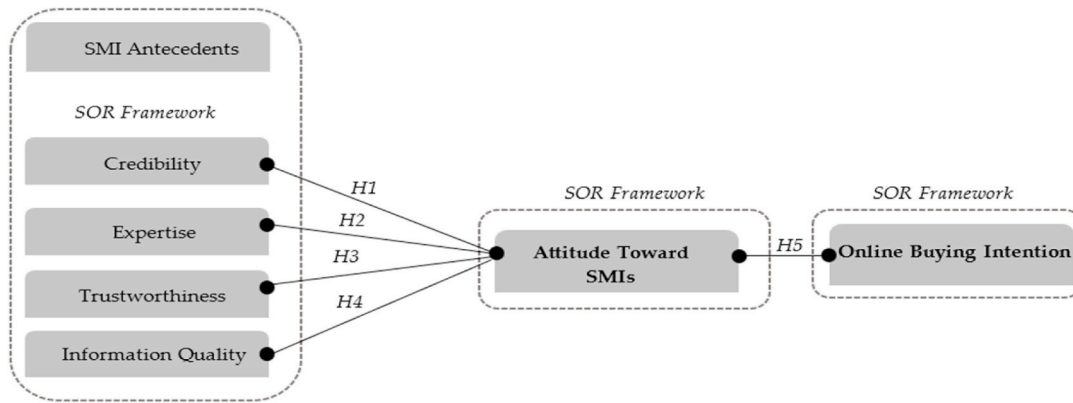


Fig. 1. Research model.

Social media platforms in Lebanon have thus become crucial spaces where consumers seek both information and reassurance in the face of uncertainty. With limited purchasing power and heightened price sensitivity, audiences tend to evaluate persuasive messages not only for entertainment but also for their credibility, trustworthiness, and practical relevance. This makes Lebanon a natural laboratory for testing SCT and the SOR paradigm under conditions of crisis, where credibility cues may carry greater weight than in stable economies.

Importantly, Lebanon's high smartphone penetration and reliance on Instagram and TikTok for brand discovery further amplify the role of influencers in shaping consumer attitudes. While prior studies on SMIs have largely been conducted in developed economies, the Lebanese context allows us to investigate whether established theoretical mechanisms hold in contexts characterized by low institutional trust and heightened consumer skepticism.

From a theoretical standpoint, fragile economies provide a critical setting to examine whether source-based persuasion mechanisms embedded in SCT and stimulus processing mechanisms within SOR remain stable under heightened uncertainty. Economic instability increases perceived risk and may alter the relative salience of credibility-related cues. Thus, Lebanon is not merely a contextual setting but a theoretically relevant boundary-testing environment. By situating this research in Lebanon, the study extends SOR and SCT by showing how economic turbulence and cultural context condition the strength of influencer attributes in driving online purchase intentions.

6. Methodology

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews. The quantitative phase tested hypothesized relationships between influencer attributes and consumers' online buying intention using structural equation modeling (SEM). The qualitative phase complemented this by exploring participants' deeper perceptions of influencers' roles and validating the statistical findings with contextual insights.

6.1. Quantitative phase

Data were collected through an online survey distributed to Lebanese social media users who follow at least one influencer. The survey includes closed-ended questions for demographic variables and five-point agreement Likert scale statements. As shown in Table 1, the constructs of SMI antecedent, covering credibility, were derived from prior literature captured by Hu et al. (2019), whereas the perceived expertise antecedent's items were tested following the study of Ismagilova et al. (2020). Measurements for SMI's trustworthiness were retrieved according to Munnukka et al. (2016), and SMI's provided quality of information items were derived based on Lou and Yuan's (2019) previous

Table 1
Operationalization of the variables.

Construct	Items	Source
Credibility (CR)	3	Hu et al. (2019)
Perceived Expertise (EXP)	3	Ismagilova et al. (2020)
Trustworthiness (TR)	4	Munnukka et al. (2016)
Quality of Information (QI)	3	Lou and Yuan (2019)
Attitude toward SMI (ATU)	4	De Veirman et al. (2017); Onem and Selvi (2024)
Online Brand Buying Intention (BI)	3	Korkmaz and Seyhan (2021); Lina et al. (2022)

observations. Social media users' attitudes towards SMI antecedents were also taken following research that links influencer marketing to attitudes towards it (De Veirman et al., 2017; Onem & Selvi, 2024). Lastly, online brand buying intention measurements were assessed based on prior observations, as evidenced by Korkmaz and Seyhan (2021) and Lina et al. (2022).

Lebanese consumers who are acquainted with and utilize social media make up the population frame. Similar to consumers around the globe, Lebanese consumers are largely affected by social media platforms in their consumption habits. Word-of-mouth referrals through both offline and digital channels are omnipresent in the highly consumer-driven lifestyle sector of Lebanese society, where connections and trust go hand-in-hand with commerce. Based on a population of 5,832,415 Lebanese people, 57% of the total population are online users via social media pages (Ipsos, 2024). Thus, out of a population of 3,324,477, the ideal sample size as per Qualtrics is 385 respondents. An appropriate sample is assumed to involve 300 qualified respondents for multivariate statistical techniques, remaining as one guideline before statistical consideration (Memon et al., 2020). After confirmation of the validity and reliability, the questionnaire was sent to Lebanese online users via social media platforms using Google Forms. A final sample was obtained comprising 402 respondents.

To secure ethical considerations, all survey participants stated their informed consent before filling out the questionnaire. Also, confidentiality was maintained throughout the data collection process. Then, JASP was utilized for data analysis.

6.2. Qualitative phase

The qualitative phase was not intended for theory generation but for theory elaboration and contextual interpretation. While SEM establishes the structural validity of the SOR pathway, it does not capture how consumers interpret credibility, expertise, or trustworthiness in practice. Given that SCT conceptualizes these attributes as perceptual evaluations of the source, a qualitative phase is theoretically warranted to uncover the cognitive and relational processes through which such evaluations

are formed. The interviews, therefore, serve to unpack the lived meanings of these constructs and explain why certain antecedents exert stronger effects than others in the Lebanese context.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture variation across age, gender, occupation, and social media usage. Twelve Lebanese social media users were recruited using snowball sampling through personal contacts and WhatsApp groups. Participants were required to (1) actively use social media platforms, and (2) have prior experience engaging with or following SMIs.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and April 2025. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min, held either face-to-face or via Zoom, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview guide covered five key areas: (1) general perceptions of influencers, (2) trustworthiness and credibility cues, (3) perceived expertise and information quality, (4) attitudes toward influencers' promotional content, and (5) online purchase behavior influenced by SMIs. The interview questions are in the supplementary file.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Coding was conducted manually, following the six-step process: familiarization, initial coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and reporting. To enhance credibility, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts and reconciled discrepancies through discussion. Themes were then compared with the quantitative findings to highlight convergences and divergences.

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was assured. Pseudonyms (P1–P12) are used when presenting illustrative quotes.

7. Quantitative results

7.1. Sample profile

Table 2 shows the sample profile of the questionnaire respondents.

7.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed to validate the underlying measurement structure of the constructs and to ensure that

Table 2
Sample profile.

Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	55.0
	Male	45.0
Age	18–28 years	39.7
	29–38 years	33.1
	39–48 years	12.6
	49–58 years	6.6
	>58 years	7.9
Occupation	Self-employed	24.5
	Employee	37.4
	Unemployed	9.6
	Retired	5.3
	Housewife	5.6
Educational Degree	University student	17.5
	Secondary	3.3
	Technical	3.0
	High School	20.9
	Bachelor's	48.0
	Master's	24.8
Monthly Income	Less than \$500	2.3
	\$500–\$1000	23.8
	\$1001–\$3000	20.5
	More than \$3000	17.2
	Prefer not to disclose	36.1
Time Spent on Social Media	Less than 2 h/day	16.9
	2–4 h/day	37.4
	More than 4 h/day	45.7

the observed items adequately represent their latent variables. Before CFA, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were conducted to confirm sampling adequacy and the presence of sufficient inter-item correlations, which are necessary pre-conditions for factor analysis. The KMO values in Table 3 are >0.7, which indicates that the outcome data are appropriate for factor analysis. Bartlett's test yields a chi-square (χ^2) of 4503.959 and a p-value of less than 0.001, indicating the presence of associations across the variables and supporting the need to proceed with conducting a factor analysis.

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were assessed to establish convergent validity and internal consistency reliability of the measurement model. AVE values above 0.50 indicate that constructs explain more than half of the variance of their indicators, while CR values exceeding 0.70 confirm the reliability of the latent constructs. Table 4 shows that the values for AVE for all factors are greater than the recommended threshold of 0.5, suggesting strong correlations among the constructs. Likewise, all obtained values of CR exceed the cutoff of 0.7 for most factors. These findings support the scale's satisfactory statistical convergent validity and internal consistency reliability of the model.

Discriminant validity was examined using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. HTMT values below the recommended threshold of 0.85 indicate that the constructs are empirically distinct. For all constructs, the threshold value for HTMT ratios is found to be less than 0.85 (Table 5). These outcomes indicate that the variables are strongly distinct from one another, confirming accepted discriminant validity.

SEM was used to simultaneously test the hypothesized relationships between latent constructs. SEM is particularly appropriate for this study as it enables the examination of complex relationships and indirect

Table 3
KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity.

KMO test	
Indicator	MSA
CR1: SMIs I follow provide credible information.	0.840
CR2: SMIs I follow provide consistent information.	0.914
CR3: SMIs I follow are a good source of product information.	0.791
TR1: I consider the SMIs I follow who are endorsing products/services truthfully.	0.776
TR2: I consider the SMIs I follow who are endorsing products/services honestly.	0.797
TR3: I consider the SMIs I follow who are endorsing products/services trustworthy.	0.892
TR4: I consider the SMIs I follow who are endorsing products/services earnestly.	0.861
EXP1: SMIs I follow are experts in what they promote.	0.930
EXP2: SMIs I follow demonstrate good knowledge of the product/service.	0.935
EXP3: SMIs I follow are well-experienced.	0.894
QI1: SMIs I follow provide accurate and reliable information about what they promote.	0.765
QI2: The content shared by SMIs is well-researched and informative.	0.832
QI3: SMIs I follow provide honest and unbiased reviews of the products they promote.	0.802
ATU1: I believe SMIs provide valuable recommendations about brands and products.	0.766
ATU2: SMIs I follow have a strong impact on my perception of brands.	0.615
ATU3: I am more likely to engage with a brand's content if an SMIs promote it.	0.566
ATU4: I trust the opinions of SMIs when they review products.	0.732
BI1: I feel more confident in purchasing online when I see an SMI using it in their daily life.	0.824
BI2: I am more likely to buy something online if it is endorsed by an SMI I follow.	0.865
BI3: Seeing an SMI using a product/service increases my interest in trying it.	0.854
Bartlett's test of sphericity	
χ^2	p
4503.959	<0.001

Table 4
AVE and composite reliability.

Factor	AVE	Composite Reliability
CR1	0.779	0.912
CR2		
CR3		
TR1		
TR2	0.764	0.927
TR3		
TR4		
EXP1		
EXP2	0.829	0.935
EXP3		
QI1		
QI2		
QI3	0.765	0.924
ATU1		
ATU2		
ATU3		
ATU4	0.708	0.905
BI1		
BI2		
BI3		

Table 5
HTMT.

Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
1.000					
0.809	1.000				
0.061	0.042	1.000			
0.513	0.488	0.053	1.000		
0.482	0.507	0.154	0.592	1.000	
0.524	0.576	0.031	0.459	0.427	1.000

effects within a single comprehensive model. All antecedents (Table 6) showed as positive predictors of users' attitudes toward SMIs: credibility ($\beta = 0.171$; p-value <0.05), trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.312$; p-value <0.001), expertise ($\beta = 0.09$, p-value <0.05), and quality of information ($\beta = 0.235$; p-value <0.001). Furthermore, attitude toward SMIs positively impacts the buying intention ($\beta = 0.496$; p-value <0.001). The results show that users' attitude toward SMIs mediates the association between SMIs' antecedents and users' online brand buying intention.

8. Qualitative results

8.1. Sample profile of interviewees

The sample profile of the interviewees is shown in Table 7.

8.2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in how Lebanese consumers interpret the attributes of SMIs and how these shape attitudes and online buying intentions. Four themes were identified: trust as currency in crisis, relatable expertise, information quality as risk reduction, and credibility as cultural alignment (Table 8). Each theme links directly to the quantitative constructs tested in the SEM, thereby enriching the interpretation of the statistical findings.

Table 6
SEM results.

Outcome	Predictor	β	p	Decision
Attitude	Credibility	0.171	0.037	Supported
	Trustworthiness	0.312	<0.001	Supported
	Expertise	0.09	0.009	Supported
	Quality of Information	0.235	<0.001	Supported
Buying Intention	Attitude	0.496	<0.001	Supported

First, trust emerged as the most frequently cited condition for engaging with influencer recommendations. Participants emphasized that honesty and transparency are decisive in determining whether they believe an influencer. Several respondents described how overt commercialization reduced credibility, while open disclosure of sponsorships enhanced confidence. As one young woman explained, *"If they admit it's an ad but keep using the product after, I believe them. If it's only ads and nothing else, I stop following"* (Female, 29). Another participant similarly noted, *"I don't mind if they are paid, but I need to feel they are genuinely convinced. Otherwise, it feels fake"* (Male, 35). These accounts highlight that in Lebanon's current economic climate, trustworthiness is perceived as a scarce but crucial currency, echoing the quantitative result that trustworthiness significantly shaped attitudes toward SMIs.

Second, participants frequently linked expertise not to formal credentials but to practical, hands-on demonstrations relevant to their context. Consumers wanted influencers to show products "in action," compare alternatives, and provide tips tailored to Lebanese conditions. For example, one respondent explained, *"I trust the ones who test and compare. Not just saying 'it's amazing,' but showing me what works here in Lebanon, with our prices and products"* (Male, 33). Another participant observed, *"When they explain step by step how to use it, or what problems they faced, I feel they know what they are talking about"* (Female, 24). These insights explain why expertise remains a meaningful, though weaker, predictor of attitudes in the SEM, as consumers equate expertise with localized, relatable knowledge rather than abstract authority.

Third, information quality was consistently described as a way to reduce the risks associated with online shopping in Lebanon. Participants valued influencers who provided detailed, decision-ready information, including delivery costs, warranty conditions, and local availability. One interviewee remarked, *"Don't just say it's cheap. Tell me which store sells it here, how much delivery costs, and if I can return it if something goes wrong"* (Female, 24). Another emphasized, *"The more details I get, the less I feel I'm wasting my money. That makes me trust the influencer"* (Male, 27). These findings clarify the quantitative path between information quality and attitudes: consumers perceive detailed information as a risk-mitigation strategy in an unstable market environment.

Fourth, credibility was framed not only as technical reliability but also as cultural and relational alignment. Participants stressed that they trust influencers who "speak like us," share local concerns, and remain approachable. As one young woman put it, *"When they use our dialect and mention our daily struggles, I feel they are real. If they copy Western styles too much, I don't listen"* (Female, 22). Another participant explained, *"The ones who answer comments or show they live the same reality as us are the ones I trust"* (Male, 31). These accounts enrich the quantitative result that credibility predicts attitudes by showing that authenticity and cultural resonance are key credibility cues in Lebanon's trust-based consumer culture.

Finally, participants described how long-term following and frequent interaction created a sense of parasocial familiarity, which transformed positive attitudes into concrete buying behavior. Many noted that they felt as if they "knew" the influencer personally, making purchase recommendations feel like peer advice. One participant explained, *"I've followed her for years. When she says a blender is good, I believe her, as a cousin told me"* (Male, 27). Another added, *"I see their stories every day. It's like they're part of my circle, so when they recommend something, I feel safe to buy it"* (Female, 33). These narratives illustrate why attitudes toward influencers exerted the strongest effect on online buying intentions in the SEM: attitudes are embedded in social-emotional bonds that drive behavior.

The qualitative findings illuminate the mechanisms behind the statistical relationships observed in the SEM. Trustworthiness, expertise, information quality, and credibility are not abstract constructs for Lebanese consumers but lived, contextualized experiences grounded in authenticity, relatability, and cultural proximity. Attitudes toward influencers translate into purchase intentions because consumers

Table 7
Interviewees' sample profile.

ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	Mostly Used Platform	Frequency of Social Media Use	Notes
P1	Female	22	University student	Instagram, TikTok	3–4 h/day	Follows beauty & fashion influencers
P2	Male	27	Marketing employee	Instagram, YouTube	2 h/day	Tech enthusiast; buys gadgets online
P3	Female	33	Self-employed	Instagram, Facebook	4+ hrs/day	Uses influencers for product sourcing ideas
P4	Male	35	Engineer	YouTube	1–2 h/day	Seeks expert reviews before purchasing
P5	Female	24	Graduate student	TikTok, Instagram	3 h/day	Prefers micro-influencers for cosmetics
P6	Male	29	Accountant	Facebook, YouTube	2 h/day	Values financial advice & practical tips
P7	Female	41	Teacher	Instagram	1 h/day	Trusts influencers with family/parenting content
P8	Male	44	Small business owner	Facebook	1–2 h/day	Looks for local deals and product credibility
P9	Female	19	Undergraduate	TikTok	5+ hrs/day	Heavy SMI follower; impulse purchases
P10	Female	38	Housewife	Instagram, Facebook	2 h/day	Interested in grocery/household promotions
P11	Male	31	IT Specialist	YouTube, Instagram	3 h/day	Relies on product comparison influencers
P12	Female	28	Freelancer (graphic design)	Instagram, TikTok	4 h/day	Engaged with lifestyle and fashion influencers

Table 8
Thematic analysis results.

Theme	Core Codes	Frequency	Illustrative Quote
1. Trust as Currency in Crisis	Transparency of sponsorship, consistency, honesty, avoiding over-commercialization	41	"If they admit it's an ad but keep using it later, I believe them. If it's only ads and nothing else, I stop following." (Female, 29)
2. Relatable Expertise	Product testing, localized comparisons, tutorials, first-hand experience	36	"Show me what works here in Lebanon, not just abroad. If they test it in our shops, I listen." (Male, 33)
3. Information Quality as Risk Reduction	Delivery info, warranties, price transparency, local availability	28	"Don't just say it's cheap. Tell me which store sells it here, how much delivery costs, and if I can return it." (Female, 24)
4. Credibility through Cultural Alignment	Shared dialect, modesty, responsiveness, everyday struggles	33	"When they use our dialect and mention our daily struggles, I feel they are real. If they copy Western styles too much, I don't listen." (Female, 22)
5. Parasocial Familiarity Turning Attitudes into Action	Daily stories, two-way engagement, sense of "knowing them."	30	"I've followed her for years. When she says a blender is good, I believe her, as a cousin told me." (Male, 27)

perceive influencers not as distant advertisers but as trusted peers within their socio-economic networks.

9. Discussion

By combining quantitative results with qualitative insights, this study confirms prior influencer marketing findings while also revealing how SMI antecedents operate differently in fragile, trust-sensitive markets. Rather than merely validating established associations, the findings demonstrate that the relative influence of influencer-related antecedents is conditioned by economic instability and heightened consumer risk sensitivity.

First, based on the findings, SMIs' credibility positively affects online consumers' attitudes toward SMIs ($\beta = 0.171$, $p = 0.037$), supporting H1 and aligning with evidence that credibility strengthens relational ties and purchase-related outcomes (Liu & Zheng, 2024) and that credibility

is linked to downstream intention in influencer contexts (Coutinho et al., 2023; Pervaiz et al., 2023). Qualitative evidence highlighted that credibility is not only about honesty but also about showing consistency in values. As one participant explained, *"If they promote every brand, I don't trust them. But when they stick to one type of product, I feel they are genuine"* (Female, 26). This suggests that in fragile markets, credibility works partly as a stability signal. Consistency reduces perceived persuasion intent and helps consumers judge whether endorsements are opportunistic or aligned. In such environments where skepticism toward sponsored content is common, credibility is not only about believability, but also about whether influencers appear to share consumers' realities and priorities.

Second, the SMIs' expertise has a positive but weak association with consumers' attitudes ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.009$), confirming H2 and corroborating studies linking expertise to persuasion and purchase intention (Batra et al., 2022; Martiningsih & Setyawan, 2022; Masuda et al., 2022). The qualitative evidence explains why the coefficient is weaker than others. Lebanese consumers interpret expertise as localized, functional competence rather than formal authority. Participants repeatedly demanded a practical demonstration in-context. This is evidenced in interviewees' responses, *"Show me what works here in Lebanon, not just abroad"* (Male, 33), and *"When they explain step by step how to use it, I feel they know what they are talking about"* (Female, 24). This implies that under economic instability, expertise must be actionable to reduce risk; symbolic expertise is insufficient if it does not translate into decision reassurance. In other words, the weaker statistical effect does not negate expertise, but indicates a higher threshold for what qualifies as "expert" in a crisis economy.

Third, SMIs' trustworthiness was demonstrated to be positively associated with attitudes toward SMIs ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), accepting H3. This is consistent with previous evidence, like Rathnayaka and Lakshika (2023), Lefina and Hidayat (2022), and Ding (2024). The qualitative findings clarify why trustworthiness dominates in this context. Consumers rely heavily on authenticity and interaction as cues of honesty. As one participant put it, *"When they reply to comments or admit mistakes, I trust them more"* (Male, 21). In fragile markets where purchase mistakes carry higher financial consequences, trustworthiness functions less as a "nice-to-have" persuasion enhancer and more as a risk-mitigation heuristic. It lowers skepticism, reduces perceived vulnerability, and stabilizes attitudes under uncertainty.

Fourth, SMIs' quality of information affects online consumers' attitudes toward SMIs ($\beta = 0.235$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. This is consistent with prior evidence that message value and content quality shape consumer trust and branded content outcomes (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and that consumers prefer tailored informative influencer content that supports brand-related decisions (Ilieva et al., 2024). The qualitative results show that in Lebanon, information quality is valued primarily for decision safety rather than convenience: participants asked for localized tips and practical constraints. The participants highlighted that they value practical, tailored content rather than generic brand promotion: *"I don't want ads copied from abroad. I want tips that fit my*

budget and our products here" (Female, 29). This finding shows how the quality of information becomes a credibility cue in unstable markets where consumers rely on SMIs to filter relevant and reliable knowledge. This supports the interpretation that information quality in Lebanon operates as a risk-reduction mechanism, helping consumers avoid waste and regret under constrained purchasing power.

Lastly, attitudes toward SMIs are strongly associated with online buying intention ($\beta = 0.496$; $p < 0.001$), supporting H5 and consistent with prior research showing attitudes as key predictors of purchase-related intentions in influencer contexts (Al-Sous et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2019). Importantly, qualitative evidence emphasizes that attitudes convert into buying behavior when influencers appear both competent and relatable. As one participant observed, *"If I feel they are like me, facing the same struggles, then I follow their advice to buy"* (Female, 22). This aligns with prior work emphasizing familiarity, identification, and influencer appeal as drivers of brand-related attitudes and intentions (Tian et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2019). Thus, the organism stage in SOR is not purely cognitive; it is socially embedded through perceived proximity and ongoing exposure.

In brief, this study is particularly relevant because it examines SMIs within the Lebanese context, a fragile economy characterized by institutional distrust, economic volatility, and heightened consumer risk sensitivity. While prior influencer marketing research has largely focused on stable or developed markets, little is known about how influencer credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and information quality operate under conditions of uncertainty. The findings advance understanding of influencer attributes by showing that trustworthiness and information quality are not merely persuasive enhancers but function as risk-reduction mechanisms in crisis-affected environments. By combining quantitative modeling with qualitative inquiry, this study not only tests established theoretical relationships but also reveals how these constructs are interpreted and enacted by consumers in practice. The qualitative component adds substantial value by uncovering context-specific meanings, such as trust as a survival-oriented heuristic and expertise as localized, practical competence, that cannot be captured through survey data alone.

10. Conclusion

SMIs have evolved into powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers, shaping perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately purchase decisions. This study highlights how the characteristics of SMIs function as central drivers of consumer behavior.

10.1. Theoretical implications

Drawing on the SOR model, this study empirically demonstrates that influencer-related stimuli operate through attitudinal processing to shape online buying intentions. By positioning SMIs within this framework, the findings underscore that influencers are not merely passive brand messengers but active stimuli capable of evoking psychological states that directly translate into consumer behavior. This enriches prior applications of SOR in digital marketing by highlighting its relevance in influencer marketing, particularly in emerging markets where consumers rely heavily on relatable online cues. Importantly, the findings indicate that economic fragility operates as a boundary condition that reshapes the relative salience of SMI antecedents within the SOR process, amplifying the role of trustworthiness and information quality under heightened risk sensitivity.

At the same time, the results advance the SCT, which posits that a communicator's expertise, trustworthiness, and quality of information determine persuasive impact. The findings extend this framework by showing that trustworthiness and information quality remain dominant in shaping attitudes, while credibility and expertise also exert significant, although comparatively weaker, influence. Importantly, the qualitative insights reveal that these SMI antecedents are context-

specific. Expertise is evaluated through localized demonstrations rather than formal credentials, and trustworthiness is judged through authenticity and interaction rather than reputation alone. This contextualization sharpens the theoretical understanding of source credibility in fragile economies.

Thus, the dual application of SOR and SCT provides a comprehensive lens for explaining how influencers generate consumer responses. The model demonstrates that SMIs function not only as symbolic representatives of brands but also as impulse mechanisms that directly shape cognition, emotions, and buying intentions in digital contexts. By integrating both frameworks, the study bridges stimulus-driven consumer psychology and source-based persuasion, offering a more nuanced understanding of influencer marketing in practice.

Furthermore, the qualitative findings reinforce these theoretical insights by grounding them in the Lebanese consumer context. For instance, SOR theory is exemplified by participants' descriptions of how influencers' localized demonstrations (stimulus) shaped trust and confidence (organism), ultimately influencing purchase intentions (response). Similarly, SCT is extended by showing that expertise is perceived as practical, relatable guidance rather than formal authority, while trustworthiness is associated with authenticity and transparency in interactions. These contextual nuances illustrate how theoretical frameworks unfold in practice, demonstrating that the relative influence of influencer-related antecedents is not universally stable but is shaped by cultural, economic, and market realities.

In brief, beyond confirming established relationships, this study advances influencer marketing theory in several important ways. First, by applying the SOR model and SCT within a fragile economic context, the findings demonstrate that credibility-based mechanisms are contingent on market conditions rather than universally stable. Second, the study refines existing conceptualizations of influencer attributes by showing that trustworthiness and information quality function primarily as risk-reduction mechanisms in crisis-affected environments, while expertise is evaluated through localized, practical demonstrations rather than formal authority. Third, the integration of qualitative insights extends prior quantitative research by explaining how and why these credibility dimensions shape consumer attitudes and purchase intentions in practice. Collectively, these findings reposition influencer persuasion as a context-contingent process in which economic fragility recalibrates the relative salience of relational and informational cues. By identifying trustworthiness and information quality as dominant under conditions of heightened risk sensitivity, this study advances both SOR and SCT beyond their traditional application in stable, developed markets.

10.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several recommendations and suggested actions for brands, influencers, and policymakers operating in emerging markets.

First, for brands and marketers, the findings indicate that trustworthiness and information quality are the strongest drivers of consumer attitudes toward influencers, and ultimately, purchase intentions. Campaigns should therefore prioritize partnerships with influencers who can demonstrate authentic, localized knowledge of products rather than relying solely on follower counts or celebrity status. For example, respondents emphasized that they trust influencers who test products in local conditions and explain usage in practical ways. Thus, marketers should select influencers whose expertise aligns with the brand category and provide them with opportunities to create hands-on demonstrations, tutorials, and product comparisons tailored to local realities.

Second, for SMIs themselves, the findings highlight the importance of trust-building behaviors. Qualitative insights revealed that consumers often evaluate trustworthiness through transparency, honesty about product limitations, and genuine interaction with followers. Influencers should focus on sustained engagement, disclose sponsorships clearly,

and avoid over-commercialization, as credibility is easily undermined when content is perceived as inauthentic. Cultivating a reputation for balanced, experience-based recommendations is likely to yield stronger and longer-term follower loyalty.

Third, for social media platforms and policymakers, the study underscores the need for clearer guidelines and regulatory frameworks around disclosure, authenticity, and advertising standards. Given the reliance of consumers in fragile economies on influencer cues, ensuring transparency in sponsored content is essential to protect consumers and sustain trust in digital ecosystems. Platforms may also consider certification mechanisms for influencers who consistently meet quality and disclosure standards.

Finally, the results are particularly salient for emerging markets such as Lebanon, where economic fragility amplifies consumer sensitivity to credibility cues. Consumers are less persuaded by glamour or celebrity status and more by influencers who “speak their language” and acknowledge local challenges such as price fluctuations and product availability. Brands seeking to expand in such contexts should therefore invest in long-term relationships with relatable, context-aware influencers, leveraging them not only for product endorsement but also as partners in building consumer education and trust.

Together, these findings equip practitioners with strategies to harness influencer credibility in ways that enhance consumer trust, sustain brand equity, and strengthen online purchase intention in fragile economies.

10.3. Limitations and future studies

Despite the insights generated, this study has several limitations.

First, the research was conducted in a single national context, Lebanon, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While Lebanon provides a valuable case of a fragile and turbulent economy, the results cannot be assumed to apply to more stable or digitally mature markets. Future studies could extend this research by conducting comparative cross-country analyses to assess whether the influence of SMI credibility, expertise, trustworthiness, and information quality differs across cultural, economic, and regulatory contexts.

Second, the study examined SMI antecedents at a single point in time since it was the only available design amid the turbulence and crises in Lebanon. However, this restricts understanding of how perceptions may evolve. In dynamic environments such as social media, attitudes can shift quickly due to changes in influencer behavior, platform algorithms, or broader market conditions. Longitudinal studies could therefore provide a richer picture of how influencer credibility and consumer trust develop or erode over time.

Finally, while this study focused on consumer perceptions, future research might also integrate the brand perspective to understand how firms strategically select, evaluate, and manage influencer partnerships. Examining both sides of the relationship would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which SMIs shape consumer behavior and brand outcomes.

In sum, while this study establishes a foundational understanding of how SMI credibility shapes consumer attitudes and purchase intentions in Lebanon, there remains considerable scope for future research. Extending the work across countries, using richer qualitative and longitudinal designs, and incorporating brand-side perspectives would provide deeper theoretical insights and more practical guidance for influencer marketing in diverse contexts.

11. Declarations

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly to enhance the English writing in the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the article.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nada Jabbour Al Maalouf: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Maged Eid:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Elie Sayegh:** Supervision, Formal analysis. **Dina Fattouh:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology.

Ethical statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Higher Center for Research (HCR) at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK), Lebanon. The committee, consisting of Father Charbel Chlela, Prof. Mirna Mzawak, and Prof. Nabil Nemer, evaluated the research protocol, proposal, and consent form, and granted approval (Reference: HCR/EC 2025-020) during its meeting on February 06, 2025. The certificate of approval is valid for one year (February 06, 2025 – February 06, 2026). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Declaration of the use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly for proofreading and spell checking. The authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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