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Influencer Parasocial Trust and Purchase Intention Among Young Adult Social Media Users

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a dominant strategy for reaching young consumers, with source credibility widely theorized to shape purchase behavior through the psychological bonds followers form with influencers. However, evidence testing this mechanism specifically through parasocial trust, rather than parasocial interaction more broadly, remains limited within the Philippine context. This study examined whether perceived influencer credibility predicts purchase intention among Filipino university students, and whether this relationship is mediated by parasocial trust. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 250 currently enrolled undergraduate and graduate students (aged 18–24) at a private university in Manila, Philippines, selected through purposive sampling. Respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire measuring perceived influencer credibility, parasocial trust, and purchase intention on 5-point Likert scales. Data were analyzed using simple linear regression and bootstrap-based mediation analysis (bias-corrected, 1,000 resamples). Results indicated that perceived influencer credibility did not significantly predict purchase intention ($B = 0.050$, $p = .380$) or parasocial trust ($B = -0.012$, $p = .864$), and parasocial trust did not significantly mediate the relationship between the two (indirect effect = -0.003 , 95% CI $[-0.038, 0.032]$). Notably, parasocial trust independently and significantly predicted purchase intention ($B = 0.244$, $p < .001$) when credibility was controlled for. These findings depart from prior evidence supporting this mediation pathway in other national contexts, suggesting that generalized, non-influencer-specific measures of credibility may not reliably predict trust or purchase behavior among Filipino university students. The study contributes context-specific evidence to the influencer-marketing literature and highlights the need for more individuated measurement approaches in future research.

Keywords: *source credibility, parasocial trust, purchase intention, social media influencers, Filipino university students, mediation analysis*

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing has become one of the most cost-effective and widely adopted tools in digital marketing, particularly for products and lifestyle content consumed by digitally native audiences who increasingly rely on social media figures such as beauty vloggers to inform their purchase decisions (Garg & Bakshi, 2024). As brands increasingly shift promotional spending toward social media personalities rather than traditional celebrity endorsers, understanding precisely how these influencers move a follower from mere awareness to an actual intention to buy has become a central concern in consumer behavior research.

Purchase intention remains one of the most consequential outcome variables in this line of research, since it functions as the most immediate and measurable psychological precursor to actual buying behavior. Marketers and scholars alike treat it as the practical endpoint of influencer-marketing effectiveness, which is why nearly every study on influencer credibility ultimately traces its effects back to this variable.

The predictor most consistently linked to purchase intention in this literature is influencer credibility, a construct long grounded in Ohanian's (1990) source credibility theory, which conceptualizes an endorser's persuasive power through the dimensions of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. This framework has been applied across dozens of studies to explain why some influencers move their followers to act while others do not, establishing credibility as a durable and theoretically well-supported predictor of downstream consumer responses.

What is less settled, however, is the precise psychological mechanism through which credibility translates into intention. A growing body of work has turned to parasocial interaction theory, originally articulated by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the one-sided, intimacy-like bonds media audiences form with media figures, as the explanatory bridge. Liu and Zheng (2024) found that informative value, authenticity, and homophily of influencer content positively affect parasocial relationships, which in turn shape followers' purchase intention and their evaluation of brand credibility, framing parasocial relationships as the mediating mechanism between influencer content and purchase outcomes. Other work has isolated trust specifically, rather than parasocial interaction more broadly, as the more precise mediating variable: Garg and Bakshi (2024) found that credible attributes of beauty vloggers and parasocial interactions affect purchase intention by operating through trust as a mediating mechanism. Similarly, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) found that both credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions among Instagram and YouTube followers, with the relative weight of each varying meaningfully by generational cohort.

This pattern is not unique to a single cultural setting. Tripopsakul and Hoonsoopon (2025) modeled influencer credibility as a predictor of purchase intention through the mediating role of parasocial relationships using a Thai sample, examining how this mechanism operates alongside the moderating role of product involvement, underscoring that the credibility-to-trust-to-intention pathway is a live and evolving line of inquiry across regional markets, not one confined to Western contexts.

The Philippines offers a particularly relevant, and comparatively underexamined, setting for this question. Filipino consumers are frequently characterized as highly engaged social media users, and a small but growing body of local research has begun tracing the direct link between influencer credibility and purchase intention. Singco et al. (2023), surveying 430 Filipino consumers active on influencer platforms, found that expertise emerged as the most influential credibility dimension in predicting purchase intentions, while attractiveness and trustworthiness demonstrated positive but comparatively weaker effects. Separately, Dalangin et al. (2021), surveying 200 respondents from Metro Manila, most of whom were between 18 and 24 years old, found that an influencer perceived as honest and trustworthy can meaningfully shift consumers' purchase intention, offering direct precedent for the age bracket and general population under investigation in the present study.

What remains largely untested in this local literature, however, is the specific mediating mechanism connecting credibility to intention. Existing Philippine studies have modeled the direct credibility–purchase intention relationship, or have examined influencer effects through alternative theoretical lenses such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, but have not yet isolated parasocial trust, distinct from the broader and more diffuse construct of parasocial interaction or parasocial relationship, as the explanatory pathway. International evidence increasingly suggests that trust, specifically, rather than parasocial interaction in general, may be the more precise mediating variable, but this pattern has so far been tested primarily in South Asian and Southeast Asian markets outside the Philippines. Whether the same mediating mechanism holds among Filipino university students, a population that is both highly social-media-engaged and a common target of influencer marketing campaigns, remains an open empirical question.

This study addresses that gap by examining whether perceived influencer credibility significantly predicts purchase intention among Filipino university students aged 18 to 24, and whether this relationship operates through parasocial trust as a mediating mechanism. In doing so, the study contributes theoretically by extending the parasocial-trust mediation model to an underrepresented national context; empirically by providing local, primary-data evidence on a mechanism that has so far only been inferred from international samples; and practically by offering brands and marketers operating in the Philippine market a more precise basis for influencer selection, one grounded in the psychological pathway through which credibility actually converts into purchase behavior, rather than treating credibility as a direct, unmediated driver of intention.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Influencer Credibility

Influencer credibility is most commonly conceptualized through Ohanian's (1990) source credibility model, which decomposes an endorser's persuasive appeal into expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Across the empirical literature, credibility is consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of purchase intention available to influencer-marketing researchers. A meta-analysis synthesizing 176 effect sizes from 62 individual studies and 22,554 respondents concluded that influencer credibility affects purchase intention more strongly than any other influencer attribute examined, including entertainment value, informativeness, and homophily (Ao et al., 2023). This pattern recurs across product categories and national contexts, from skincare marketing in Indonesia, where influencer marketing alone accounted for 68.5% of purchase-intention variance (Sabatini & Prayudha, 2025), to university-student samples in Saudi Arabia, where influencer credibility and brand credibility jointly predicted purchase intention with partial mediation (Saad et al., 2025).

Within credibility's three sub-dimensions, trustworthiness emerges as the most frequently dominant predictor among young consumers specifically, outperforming attractiveness in studies of Indonesian Generation Z (Marklen et al., 2025), micro-influencer audiences (Dema et al., 2025), young Egyptian consumers (Shaheen et al., 2025), and Indian beauty-vlogger followers, where attractiveness had a negligible effect while trustworthiness was significant (Garg & Bakshi, 2024). This pattern is not universal, however. A Vietnamese study of beauty-product consumers found expertise, not trustworthiness, carried the strongest effect (An et al., 2024), and a study of Indonesian women aged 20–35 found trustworthiness non-significant while attractiveness and expertise were both significant (Ayu et al., 2026). Two studies also complicate the assumption that credibility automatically converts into purchase behavior: a Malaysian retail-pharmaceutical study found that trustworthiness specifically did not significantly predict purchase intention, though expertise did (Mya et al., 2025), and a separate study found that while credibility dimensions positively shaped attitudes toward advertisements, those attitudes did not carry through to purchase intention (Ata et al., 2022). These nonsignificant and contradictory findings are preserved here deliberately, since they indicate that credibility's effect, while robust in aggregate, is neither universal nor mechanically direct. In an adjacent Philippine higher-education marketing context, analysis of feeder-school Facebook discourse likewise treated trust and credibility as choice-related cues emerging from community-aligned communication, underscoring that credibility operates within a broader relational and contextual ecology rather than as an isolated persuasive signal (Atento & Espelita, 2025).

2.2 Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Trust

Parasocial interaction theory, originating with Horton and Wohl's (1956) account of the one-sided, intimacy-like bonds media audiences form with media figures, provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how influencer credibility might operate psychologically rather than only informationally. Empirical evidence supports the first link in this chain: influencer credibility significantly predicts the formation of parasocial relationships and, more specifically, follower trust. Across a sample of 506 followers of technology-oriented influencers, all four commonly measured credibility dimensions (attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, similarity) positively fostered parasocial relationship formation (Ashraf et al., 2023). A study of financial influencers refined this further, finding that trustworthiness specifically mediated the effect of the other credibility dimensions on parasocial interaction, while expertise and physical attractiveness did not predict parasocial interaction directly (Vu et al., 2024), lending direct empirical support to treating trust, rather than the broader and more diffuse parasocial-interaction construct, as the more precise psychological mechanism at work.

What the literature does not yet resolve clearly is whether parasocial trust operates as a predictor of consumer outcomes independently of general parasocial interaction, or whether the two are so conceptually intertwined that they cannot be meaningfully separated. Existing studies overwhelmingly model trust as a mediator nested within a broader parasocial-relationship pathway rather than testing it as a standalone construct entered alongside parasocial interaction as a competing predictor (Xu et al., 2022; Garg & Bakshi, 2024; Azhar et al., 2024). No study located through this review specifies a design in which trust and parasocial interaction are entered simultaneously to isolate trust's unique contribution. Some evidence even suggests parasocial relationships as a whole may exert a stronger effect on behavioral intentions than credibility itself, implying that much of what trust contributes may already be absorbed into the broader relational bond (Leite & De Paula Baptista, 2021). Outside influencer settings, Philippine retail-strategy

research similarly identifies accumulated consumer trust as a strategic asset whose value depends on continued alignment with changing expectations for access, convenience, and relevance (Atento & Atento, 2025).

2.3 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention functions across this literature as the primary behavioral outcome of interest, and trust-based mechanisms are consistently, though not always directly, linked to it. In live-streaming e-commerce, trust was found to partially mediate the relationship between parasocial relationships and purchase intention, accounting for 28.81% of the total effect, while trust fully mediated the relationship between streamer professionalism and purchase intention, entirely replacing what would otherwise appear as a direct effect (Xu et al., 2022). Similar partial-mediation patterns appear in beauty-product contexts (Garg & Bakshi, 2024) and in a Sri Lankan smartphone-market study, where brand trust partially mediated the credibility-to-purchase-intention relationship for a high-involvement product category (Gunawardhana & Bandara, 2026). In some cases the mediation is complete rather than partial: a probiotic-skincare study in Indonesia found that trust fully mediated the effect of parasocial relationships on purchase intention, with no significant residual direct effect (Atmaja et al., 2025).

Notably, at least two studies found trust had no significant direct effect on purchase intention at all, even though it functioned as a significant mediator elsewhere in the same models: a study of Indonesian Generation Z consumers found trust neither directly predicted purchase intention nor moderated the credibility-to-intention pathway (Anugraini & Amalia, 2025), and a Yogyakarta-based skincare study among Generation Z found brand trust had no significant direct effect on purchase intention despite significantly mediating the influencer-to-intention relationship (Annisa et al., 2026). These nonsignificant direct effects are preserved rather than discarded, since they are consistent with, and in fact supportive of, a mediation-only model: trust's contribution may be real but expressed almost entirely through the indirect pathway rather than as an independent, additive predictor. Product involvement also appears to moderate which mechanism dominates: high-involvement products such as smartphones favor trustworthiness-driven, more cognitive evaluation (Gunawardhana & Bandara, 2026), while low-involvement products favor parasocial, more affectively driven pathways (Tripopsakul & Hoonsopon, 2025; Filieri et al., 2022). A closely adjacent Philippine digital-marketing study among college-bound learners found brand trust to be the strongest predictor of enrollment intention, while social-media usage contributed only a smaller effect, suggesting that behavioral intention may depend more on trusted interpretation of digital exposure than on exposure alone (Espelita et al., 2026). At the firm level, Philippine case evidence on digital transformation likewise frames customer-centered value creation around redesigned digital touchpoints rather than digital presence by itself (Teodosio et al., 2025).

2.4 Relationships Among Influencer Credibility, Parasocial Trust, and Purchase Intention

The mediating role of trust between influencer credibility and purchase intention is the most directly relevant finding to the present study's design, and it is well, if unevenly, supported. Trust partially mediated this relationship among Indian beauty-vlogger audiences (Garg & Bakshi, 2024); functioned as a psychological conduit translating credibility into online purchase intention among Vietnamese consumers (Tam & Thai, 2025); and partially mediated the relationship in a multi-platform influencer study (Khan et al., 2022). A related dual-mediation study of Chinese short-form-content platform users found brand trust partially mediating the effect of parasocial relationships on purchase intention in the food and hospitality sector (Li et al., 2025).

Cross-national testing of this mechanism, however, remains thin. Nearly all of the located evidence clusters within single-country Asian studies. The one located study that explicitly tests structural invariance of a trust-mediated influencer model across two countries, a Greek–UK sustainability-marketing study, found the mechanism broadly portable across the two national contexts, though weakened among consumers with prior exposure to greenwashing (Balaskas & Yfantidou, 2026). No study located through this review has tested the credibility–trust–purchase intention mediation pathway specifically within a Filipino sample. Combined with the Section 2.2 finding that trust is rarely isolated from broader parasocial interaction as a distinct construct, this leaves a clearly identifiable space: a study modeling parasocial trust, specifically, not parasocial interaction broadly, as the sole mediator between influencer credibility and purchase intention, within a national context not yet represented in this literature. Related strategic-design work in Philippine hospitality emphasizes personalization and customer-journey fit in digitally mediated services, offering an adjacent rationale for examining whether individualized referents generate different responses from broad category-level evaluations (Benosa et al., 2026). In legacy retail, omnichannel adaptation has likewise been framed around preserving trust and authenticity while reconfiguring digital interaction for changing consumer expectations (Atento & Atento, 2026).

2.5 Influencer Marketing Among Young Adult and University Student Consumers in the Philippines and Southeast Asia

The credibility–purchase intention relationship holds consistently among university-student populations across multiple national contexts. At a Saudi Arabian university, influencer traits predicted purchase intention among 384 students ($\beta = 0.42$), with brand credibility showing an even stronger effect ($\beta = 0.51$) and partial mediation between the two (Saad et al., 2025). A Malaysian private-university study found an even stronger relationship, with credibility explaining 69.4% of purchase-intention variance (Eik et al., 2026), while a separate university-student study found perceived attractiveness and trustworthiness shaped purchasing decisions, strengthened further by parasocial interaction (Beylergil & Demir, 2025).

Philippine-specific evidence, while more limited in volume, points in the same direction. Among 200 respondents in Metro Manila, most of them between 18 and 24 years old, source credibility correlated significantly with purchase intention ($r = 0.666$) (Dalangin et al., 2021), the same population and near-identical age bracket as the present study. Among Filipino Generation Z consumers of cosmetics and skincare, trust, perceived credibility, perceived image, and brand attitude were all significantly and positively related to purchase intention (Castillo et al., 2022). A 2026 study of 380 Filipino Generation Z respondents in La Union found that nano-influencers were most effective at building trust and emotional connection, and that parasocial relationships correlated significantly with purchasing behavior ($r = 0.390$) (Balatero, 2026). Not every Philippine study finds credibility to be the dominant driver, however: one study of an international cosmetics brand's Philippine consumers found only attractiveness, uniqueness, and self-congruency significantly affected purchase intention, with the standard credibility facets falling short of significance (Tanpoco et al., 2023), a reminder that findings can be product- and context-sensitive even within the same country. Comparable Southeast Asian evidence from Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2022) and Indonesia (Wahyudi et al., 2025) reinforces that the general pattern extends across the region. More broadly, social influence among Filipino late adolescents is not confined to commercial settings: peer-influence experiences have been associated with personal-social behavior, underscoring the salience of socially mediated judgments in this age group without equating peer influence with parasocial influence (Balut et al., 2026).

Taken together, Philippine and regional evidence firmly establishes that influencer credibility predicts purchase intention among university-aged and Generation Z consumers. What has not yet been tested locally is the specific mediating mechanism of parasocial trust, isolated from the broader parasocial-relationship construct, within a Filipino university-student sample, precisely the gap this study is positioned to address.

2.6 Synthesis of the Literature

Read together, Sections 2.1 through 2.5 describe a coherent, three-part psychological sequence rather than five isolated bodies of work. The literature on influencer credibility establishes that credibility, and trustworthiness in particular, is one of the most robust predictors of purchase intention available in this field, though its effect is neither universal nor purely direct, several studies show credibility failing to convert into intention without some intervening mechanism (Mya et al., 2025; Ata et al., 2022). The literature on parasocial interaction and trust supplies that missing mechanism: credibility, and trustworthiness specifically, reliably predicts the formation of parasocial bonds and trust, even when other credibility facets do not (Vu et al., 2024). The literature on purchase intention then shows that trust's contribution to purchase intention is expressed largely, and in some studies entirely, through indirect rather than direct pathways (Xu et al., 2022; Atmaja et al., 2025; Anugraini & Amalia, 2025). Section 2.4 confirms that when these three pieces are modeled together, trust functions as a genuine mediating mechanism between credibility and purchase intention across multiple national contexts (Garg & Bakshi, 2024; Tam & Thai, 2025; Khan et al., 2022), and Section 2.5 confirms that both halves of this chain are empirically active among university-student and Filipino/Southeast Asian young-adult populations specifically (Saad et al., 2025; Dalangin et al., 2021; Balatero, 2026).

Two patterns cut across all five areas and deserve to be stated plainly. First, the evidence is consistently stronger for indirect than for direct effects: trust rarely predicts purchase intention on its own once credibility and mediating pathways are properly modeled, and in at least two studies its direct effect was statistically null even as its mediating role remained significant (Anugraini & Amalia, 2025; Annisa et al., 2026). This pattern argues in favor of testing trust as a mediator, exactly as the present study is designed to do, rather than as an additional direct predictor competing with credibility. Second, the literature has a persistent conceptual blind spot: it overwhelmingly studies trust as a component embedded within broader parasocial interaction or parasocial relationship constructs, rather than isolating trust as a standalone mediating variable in its own right (Xu et al., 2022; Garg & Bakshi, 2024; Azhar et al., 2024).

No study located in this review entered trust and parasocial interaction as simultaneous, competing predictors, which means the field has not yet cleanly established whether trust is doing separable psychological work or is simply one facet of a broader relational bond.

Geographically, the mediation pathway itself (credibility → trust → purchase intention) has been tested chiefly in South and Southeast Asian single-country studies (India, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, China) and, in one case, cross-nationally outside Asia (Greece–UK; Balaskas & Yfantidou, 2026). The Philippines has strong, independently replicated evidence for the direct credibility–purchase intention relationship (Dalangin et al., 2021; Castillo et al., 2022; Singco et al., 2023) and for parasocial relationships predicting purchasing behavior in a broad sense (Balatero, 2026), but no located study has yet connected these two Philippine literatures by testing parasocial trust specifically as the mediating mechanism between them. The conceptual and theoretical basis for the present study's hypothesized model is therefore well supported by the broader literature; what is missing is the specific combination of construct, mediation design, and population tested together. A parallel pattern appears outside marketing: among Filipino students, monetary-policy awareness and perceptions predicted saving and investing but not spending, illustrating that cognition and favorable perception do not translate uniformly across behavioral outcomes (Espelita et al., 2025).

2.7 Research Gaps

Three specific, literature-supported gaps justify the present study. The measurement and conceptual gap concerns the reviewed literature's consistent treatment of trust as embedded within, rather than distinguished from, broader parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship constructs (Xu et al., 2022; Garg & Bakshi, 2024; Azhar et al., 2024); no study located in this review tests parasocial trust as a standalone mediating construct set apart from the more diffuse parasocial-interaction or parasocial-relationship variables typically used.

The contextual and geographical gap concerns the credibility–trust–purchase intention mediation pathway, which has been empirically tested in India, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and China, and cross-nationally between Greece and the United Kingdom (Balaskas & Yfantidou, 2026), but not within the Philippines, despite Philippine research independently and repeatedly confirming both halves of the pathway separately (Dalangin et al., 2021; Singco et al., 2023; Balatero, 2026).

The population gap concerns the mediation-specific literature reviewed in Section 2.4, which draws its university-student evidence from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Malaysia (Saad et al., 2025; Bassam, 2025; Eik et al., 2026), not from the Philippines, even though the broader credibility–purchase intention relationship is well established among Filipino consumers generally and among Filipino Generation Z specifically (Castillo et al., 2022; Balatero, 2026).

These three gaps converge on, and directly support, the study's general objective: to examine whether perceived influencer credibility predicts purchase intention among Filipino university students aged 18–24, and whether this relationship is mediated by parasocial trust.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

This study draws on two established theoretical frameworks, each corresponding directly to one of the model's core constructs.

Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) holds that a communicator's persuasive effectiveness depends on the audience's perception of the communicator's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness; the more credible a source is perceived to be, the more an audience's attitudes and behavioral intentions shift in the direction the source advocates. This theory provides the basis for the study's independent variable, perceived influencer credibility, and for the expectation that credibility predicts downstream consumer responses. The theory was originally developed for traditional celebrity endorsement rather than social media influencers specifically, and it does not on its own specify the psychological mechanism connecting credibility to behavioral outcomes, a gap that Parasocial Interaction Theory is used to address.

Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) proposes that media audiences form one-sided, intimacy-like psychological bonds with media figures, experiencing a sense of familiarity and trust despite the relationship

being non-reciprocal. This theory underlies the study's mediating variable, parasocial trust, conceptualized here as a relational, trust-based outcome of these one-sided bonds. Prior research has more often treated trust as embedded within a broader parasocial interaction or parasocial relationship construct rather than isolating it as a standalone mediator; the present study's treatment of parasocial trust as a distinct, singular mediator represents a deliberate, theoretically grounded extension of how the construct has typically been operationalized.

The hypothesized model positions perceived influencer credibility as the independent variable, parasocial trust as the mediating variable, and purchase intention as the dependent variable, with no moderating, grouping, or control variables specified. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Perceived influencer credibility significantly predicts purchase intention among Filipino university students aged 18–24.

H2: Perceived influencer credibility significantly predicts parasocial trust among Filipino university students aged 18–24.

H3: Parasocial trust significantly mediates the relationship between perceived influencer credibility and purchase intention.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational and predictive survey design, testing a single-mediator model in which perceived influencer credibility was hypothesized to predict purchase intention both directly and indirectly through parasocial trust. As a cross-sectional design measuring all variables at a single point in time, the study supports statements of association and prediction, but not causation.

4.2 Research Setting

Data were collected from a single private university in Manila, Philippines. The institution's name is withheld to preserve institutional and respondent anonymity.

4.3 Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of currently enrolled tertiary-level students, undergraduate and graduate, at the target university, aged 18 to 24, who actively followed at least one social media influencer on any platform. A purposive (non-probability) sampling method was used. The final analytic sample consisted of 250 respondents meeting these criteria.

4.4 Respondents

Respondents were enrolled tertiary-level students aged 18 to 24, drawn from undergraduate (first through fourth year) and graduate-level programs, who identified as active, platform-agnostic social media users.

4.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. All substantive items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Perceived influencer credibility was measured using nine items adapted from Ohanian's (1990) source credibility scale, aggregated into a single composite score rather than reported as separate expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness sub-dimensions. Parasocial trust was measured using four items, and purchase intention using three items, both adapted following the item-development approach used by Garg and Bakshi (2024).

4.6 Instrument Validation

Content validity was established through review by a panel of three subject-matter and research-methodology experts, who evaluated the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the adapted items prior to data collection. No pilot testing, exploratory factor analysis, or confirmatory factor analysis was conducted.

4.7 Reliability Assessment

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, computed in jamovi from the collected data (see Table 2).

4.8 Data-Gathering Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google Forms. An initial round of data collection revealed inconsistencies between the year-level categories used and the study's stated age criteria; the instrument was subsequently revised to include a direct age-verification item, and data collection was repeated to ensure the final sample matched the stated inclusion criteria.

4.9 Statistical Treatment

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and Cronbach's alpha were computed to describe the levels and reliability of the three study constructs. Simple linear regression was used to test the direct relationships between perceived influencer credibility and purchase intention (H1) and between perceived influencer credibility and parasocial trust (H2). A bootstrap-based mediation analysis, using the jAMM module in jamovi with bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (1,000 resamples), was used to test whether parasocial trust mediated the relationship between perceived influencer credibility and purchase intention (H3).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethics clearance from the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) of the target university, approved on March 2, 2026. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all respondents through a consent statement embedded at the start of the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, respondents could withdraw at any point without penalty, no incentive was offered for participation, responses remained anonymous, and the study posed no more than minimal risk to participants.

5. Results

5.1 Respondent Profile

Of the 250 respondents, the majority were female ($n = 142$, 56.8%), compared to 88 male respondents (35.2%) and 20 (8.0%) who declined to disclose their sex (Table 1). By year level, most respondents were in their first or second year ($n = 136$, 54.4%), followed by third- or fourth-year students ($n = 100$, 40.0%), with a smaller proportion of graduate-level students ($n = 14$, 5.6%). By age, half the sample fell within the 18–20 bracket ($n = 126$, 50.4%), followed by 21–22 ($n = 90$, 36.0%) and 23–24 ($n = 34$, 13.6%).

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Profile

Category	f	%
Sex		
Male	88	35.2
Female	142	56.8
Not Said	20	8.0
Total	250	100.0
Year Level		

Category	f	%
First and Second Year	136	54.4
Third and Fourth Year	100	40.0
Masters Level	14	5.6
Total	250	100.0
Age		
18–20	126	50.4
21–22	90	36.0
23–24	34	13.6
Total	250	100.0

Note. $N = 250$. “Not Said” reflects respondents who declined to disclose sex. Respondents are limited to currently enrolled undergraduate and graduate-level students aged 18–24 at the target university.

5.2 Levels of the Study Constructs

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for the three study constructs. Respondents reported an “Agree”-level mean for perceived influencer credibility ($M = 36.3$, $SD = 2.30$; per-item $M = 4.03$ on the 5-point scale), parasocial trust ($M = 13.8$, $SD = 2.55$; per-item $M = 3.45$), and purchase intention ($M = 10.4$, $SD = 2.07$; per-item $M = 3.47$). Internal consistency reliability was acceptable for parasocial trust ($\alpha = .732$) and purchase intention ($\alpha = .778$), but questionable for perceived influencer credibility ($\alpha = .623$), indicating that the credibility measure carried more measurement error than the other two constructs in this sample.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Study Constructs

Construct	Items	M (Total)	SD	M (Item)	Interp.	α	n
Perceived Influencer Credibility	9	36.3	2.30	4.03	Agree	.623	250
Parasocial Trust	4	13.8	2.55	3.45	Agree	.732	250
Purchase Intention	3	10.4	2.07	3.47	Agree	.778	250

Note. $N = 250$. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree. Verbal interpretation bands: 1.00–1.80 Strongly Disagree, 1.81–2.60 Disagree, 2.61–3.40 Neutral, 3.41–4.20 Agree, 4.21–5.00 Strongly Agree. Reliability benchmarks per George and Mallery (2003): $\geq .90$ Excellent, $\geq .80$ Good, $\geq .70$ Acceptable, $\geq .60$ Questionable, $\geq .50$ Poor, $< .50$ Unacceptable.

5.3 Perceived Influencer Credibility and Purchase Intention (H1)

A simple linear regression was conducted to determine whether perceived influencer credibility predicts purchase intention. The overall model was not statistically significant, $F(1, 248) = 0.774$, $p = .380$, $R^2 = .003$, indicating that perceived influencer credibility accounted for less than 1% of the variance in purchase intention. The predictor did not significantly predict purchase intention, $B = 0.050$, $SE = 0.057$, $\beta = 0.056$, $t(248) = 0.880$, $p = .380$, 95% CI $[-0.062, 0.163]$, with the confidence interval for B spanning zero. H1 was not supported.

Table 3. Regression Results: Influencer Credibility Predicting Purchase Intention

Predictor	B	SE	β	95% CI	t	p
(Constant)	8.528	2.078	—	[4.436, 12.620]	4.105	<.001
Perceived Influencer Credibility	0.050	0.057	0.056	[-0.062, 0.163]	0.880	.380

Note. $N = 250$. Outcome variable: Purchase Intention. Model: $R = 0.056$, $R^2 = 0.003$, Adjusted $R^2 = -0.001$, $F(1, 248) = 0.774$, $p = .380$.

5.4 Perceived Influencer Credibility and Parasocial Trust (H2)

A second simple linear regression tested whether perceived influencer credibility predicts parasocial trust. The overall model was not statistically significant, $F(1, 248) = 0.030$, $p = .864$, $R^2 < .001$. The predictor did not significantly predict parasocial trust, $B = -0.012$, $SE = 0.070$, $\beta = -0.011$, $t(248) = -0.172$, $p = .864$, 95% CI $[-0.151, 0.126]$. H2 was not supported.

Table 4. Regression Results: Influencer Credibility Predicting Parasocial Trust

Predictor	B	SE	β	95% CI	t	p
(Constant)	14.223	2.560	—	[9.180, 19.266]	5.555	<.001
Perceived Influencer Credibility	-0.012	0.070	-0.011	[-0.151, 0.126]	-0.172	.864

Note. $N = 250$. Outcome variable: Parasocial Trust. Model: $R = 0.011$, $R^2 < 0.001$, Adjusted $R^2 = -0.004$, $F(1, 248) = 0.030$, $p = .864$.

5.5 Mediation Analysis (H3)

A bootstrap-based mediation analysis (bias-corrected method, 1,000 resamples) was conducted to test whether parasocial trust mediates the relationship between perceived influencer credibility and purchase intention (Table 5). The path from credibility to trust (path a) was not significant, $B = -0.012$, $\beta = -0.011$, $z = -0.173$, $p = .863$. The path from trust to purchase intention, controlling for credibility (path b), was statistically significant, $B = 0.244$, $\beta = 0.300$, $z = 4.984$, $p < .001$. The indirect effect of credibility on purchase intention through parasocial trust was small and not statistically significant, $B = -0.003$, $SE = 0.017$, 95% BC CI $[-0.038, 0.032]$. The direct effect of credibility on purchase intention, controlling for trust, was also not significant, $B = 0.053$, $\beta = 0.059$, $z = 0.980$, $p = .327$, as was the unmediated total effect, $B = 0.050$, $\beta = 0.056$, $z = 0.881$, $p = .378$. H3 was not supported.

Notably, while none of the three hypothesized paths involving perceived influencer credibility reached significance, parasocial trust significantly predicted purchase intention on its own within the mediation model.

Table 5. Mediation Analysis: Parasocial Trust as Mediator Between Influencer Credibility and Purchase Intention

Effect	Est.	SE	95% BC CI	β	z	p
Path a: PIC → PT	-0.0121	0.0701	[-0.1498, 0.1299]	-0.0109	-0.173	.863
Path b: PT → PI	0.2440	0.0490	[0.1604, 0.3266]	0.3002	4.984	<.001
Indirect effect (a×b)	-0.0030	0.0171	[-0.0376, 0.0316]	-0.0033	-0.172	.863
Direct effect (c'): PIC → PI	0.0532	0.0542	[-0.0613, 0.1680]	0.0590	0.980	.327
Total effect (c): PIC → PI	0.0502	0.0570	[-0.0650, 0.1743]	0.0558	0.881	.378

Note. $N = 250$. PIC = Perceived Influencer Credibility; PT = Parasocial Trust; PI = Purchase Intention. Bootstrap method: bias-corrected (BC), 1,000 resamples, 95% CI.

5.6 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 6 consolidates the decision for each hypothesis. All three hypotheses, the direct credibility–purchase intention relationship (H1), the credibility–trust relationship (H2), and the trust-mediated pathway between credibility and purchase intention (H3), were not supported by the data collected.

Table 6. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statistical Test	Key Statistic	p	Decision
H1: Credibility predicts purchase intention	Simple linear regression	$B = 0.050, t(248) = 0.880$	.380	Not Supported
H2: Credibility predicts parasocial trust	Simple linear regression	$B = -0.012, t(248) = -0.172$	.864	Not Supported
H3: Parasocial trust mediates credibility → purchase intention	Bootstrap mediation (BC, 1,000 resamples)	Indirect = -0.003 , 95% CI $[-0.038, 0.032]$	.863	Not Supported

Note. All three hypotheses were not supported by the collected data.

6. Discussion

6.1 Perceived Influencer Credibility and Purchase Intention

Perceived influencer credibility did not significantly predict purchase intention in this sample ($B = 0.050, p = .380$), accounting for less than one percent of the variance. This result runs counter to the dominant pattern in the reviewed literature, where credibility has repeatedly emerged as one of the strongest predictors of purchase intention across product categories and national contexts, including a meta-analysis of 62 studies and over 22,000 respondents (Ao et al., 2023) and multiple university-student samples in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Jordan (Saad et al., 2025; Eik et al., 2026; Bassam, 2025). It is not, however, without precedent: a small number of studies identified similarly null or weak effects, including a Malaysian retail-pharmaceutical study where trustworthiness failed to predict purchase intention (Mya et al., 2025) and a Turkish study where credibility shaped advertising attitudes without those attitudes carrying through to purchase intention (Ata et al., 2022).

Several plausible, non-exclusive explanations merit consideration. First, the credibility construct's internal consistency was questionable ($\alpha = .623$), meaning the measure carried more random error than the parasocial trust or purchase intention measures; under classical test theory, greater measurement error attenuates observed relationships toward zero regardless of whether a true relationship exists. Second, credibility scores showed a restricted range, which can similarly compress observed associations. Third, the study measured credibility toward influencers in general rather than a specific named influencer or product category, unlike much of the reviewed literature, which typically anchored respondents to a concrete referent; a generic, platform-agnostic framing may be too diffuse a stimulus to reliably move purchase intention, consistent with evidence that the credibility–intention link is itself moderated by product category and involvement level (Tripopsakul & Hoonsoopon, 2025; Gunawardhana & Bandara, 2026). A more conservative possibility is that the relationship is genuinely weak or absent in this specific population. The present data cannot distinguish among these explanations.

6.2 Perceived Influencer Credibility and Parasocial Trust

The near-zero relationship between credibility and parasocial trust ($B = -0.012, p = .864$) is a more striking departure from the literature, since this specific pathway had been one of the more consistently supported findings in prior research: credibility dimensions, and trustworthiness in particular, have reliably predicted parasocial relationship and trust formation across contexts (Ashraf et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2024; Aggarwal & Shah, 2024). Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) would predict that perceiving a source as credible should foster the relational bond underlying parasocial trust; the present data do not support that expectation.

A theoretically relevant explanation is that parasocial bonds are, by definition, formed with a specific, individuated media figure rather than with influencers as an undifferentiated category. Much of the supporting literature measured credibility toward one particular influencer or a narrow influencer type (e.g., Vu et al., 2024; Ashraf et al., 2023). The platform-agnostic, non-influencer-specific measurement approach used in this study may not adequately capture the individuated, relational quality that parasocial trust theoretically requires.

6.3 Mediation of Parasocial Trust

Given that neither the credibility-to-trust path nor the total credibility-to-purchase-intention effect reached significance, the null indirect effect ($B = -0.003$, 95% CI $[-0.038, 0.032]$) follows directly rather than presenting an independent puzzle: an indirect effect is the product of its component paths, and with the first path effectively zero, no meaningful indirect effect could emerge regardless of the strength of the second. The mediation hypothesis was not supported because its necessary precondition, a credibility–trust relationship, was not present in this data.

6.4 An Unhypothesized Pattern: Trust Predicting Purchase Intention

While not itself a separately stated hypothesis, the path from parasocial trust to purchase intention, controlling for credibility, was statistically significant and moderate in size ($B = 0.244$, $\beta = 0.300$, $p < .001$). This is consistent with prior evidence that parasocial trust, once present, reliably relates to purchase intention (Garg & Bakshi, 2024; Xu et al., 2022; Gunawardhana & Bandara, 2026). Read alongside the null H1 and H2 findings, this pattern suggests that the relevant mechanism in this sample may not be broken so much as incompletely modeled: trust does appear to matter for purchase intention among these respondents, but perceived influencer credibility, at least as measured here, does not appear to be what produces that trust. Other antecedents not measured in this study, such as perceived authenticity, relatability, or frequency of parasocial interaction, may be more proximate drivers of trust formation in this population.

6.5 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, these findings raise a specific question about whether Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, as jointly applied here, adequately explain purchase-related outcomes when credibility is measured toward influencers as a general category rather than toward a specific, individuated influencer. Practically, brands and marketers targeting Filipino university students should not assume that building generalized influencer-credibility perceptions will reliably translate into purchase intention or trust; the present data suggest that trust itself, however it is formed, matters more directly, warranting further investigation into what actually builds it in this population. All interpretations above remain within the bounds of what this cross-sectional, correlational design can support; none of the findings establish causation, and no claims are made beyond association and prediction.

7. Conclusion

This study examined whether perceived influencer credibility predicts purchase intention among Filipino university students aged 18–24, and whether that relationship operates through parasocial trust. The findings do not support the hypothesized model: perceived influencer credibility, as measured in this sample, did not significantly predict purchase intention, did not significantly predict parasocial trust, and parasocial trust did not mediate a relationship between the two. All three hypotheses were unsupported.

At the same time, the data revealed a pattern worth carrying forward: parasocial trust itself was significantly and positively associated with purchase intention, independent of credibility. Taken together, these results suggest that among this population, trust appears to matter for purchase-related outcomes, but generalized, platform-agnostic perceptions of influencer credibility do not appear to be the mechanism that produces it, at least not as credibility was operationalized in this study.

The study's empirical contribution lies in testing, for the first time within a Filipino university-student sample, a credibility–trust–purchase intention mediation pathway that had previously been supported primarily in South and Southeast Asian contexts outside the Philippines. Rather than confirming that pathway, this study's results complicate the assumption that the mechanism generalizes uniformly across populations and measurement approaches, underscoring that mediation findings established elsewhere should not be assumed to transfer automatically to new samples or to more generic, non-influencer-specific operationalizations of credibility.

Theoretically, the results raise a specific, bounded question rather than a broad challenge to either framework used: whether Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, as applied to influencer marketing, require credibility to be anchored to a particular, individuated influencer to produce the relational and behavioral effects documented elsewhere in the literature. The null findings here are consistent with, though not proof of, the possibility

that a generic measure of influencer credibility is too diffuse a stimulus for these theoretical mechanisms to operate as expected.

Practically, the findings offer a caution rather than a directive: brands and marketers targeting Filipino university students should not assume that cultivating broad, category-level perceptions of influencer credibility will reliably translate into consumer trust or purchase intention. Whatever drives trust formation and purchase intention in this population, it does not appear, from this evidence, to be reducible to credibility judgments toward influencers in general.

These conclusions are limited to what a cross-sectional, correlational design can support. No causal claims are made, and the findings should not be generalized beyond the population, setting, and measurement approach used in this study.

8. Recommendations and Implications

Recommendations below are restricted to what the actual findings support. Since perceived influencer credibility did not significantly predict either mediator or outcome, no recommendation below asserts that building credibility as broadly measured here will drive purchase behavior, as that claim is not supported by this study's data.

8.1 Managerial and Marketing Recommendations

Brands and marketers targeting Filipino university-aged consumers should not treat generalized influencer credibility, measured as a broad category-level perception, as a reliable lever for purchase intention on the basis of this study's findings. Since parasocial trust was the one construct that significantly predicted purchase intention, marketing efforts may be better directed at understanding and cultivating trust directly, though this study cannot specify what actually builds that trust, since credibility did not.

8.2 Methodological Recommendations

Future instruments measuring influencer credibility in this population should consider anchoring the construct to a specific, named influencer or a narrowly defined influencer type, rather than influencers as an undifferentiated category, consistent with how most of the reviewed literature's supporting studies operationalized the construct. Researchers should also consider reporting credibility's three sub-dimensions (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness) separately rather than as a single composite, given this study's comparatively low composite reliability ($\alpha = .623$); a sub-dimension approach may reveal effects that aggregation obscured.

8.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should examine alternative antecedents of parasocial trust beyond credibility, such as perceived authenticity, relatability, or frequency and intensity of parasocial interaction, given that trust itself, once present, was shown here to meaningfully predict purchase intention. Replication with a specific-influencer or single-platform framing (e.g., TikTok or Instagram specifically) would also help clarify whether this study's null findings reflect a genuine absence of the credibility–trust–intention pathway in this population, or an artifact of the platform-agnostic, generic measurement approach used here.

9. Limitations

All data were collected at a single point in time, meaning the study can establish association and, within a regression framework, prediction, but not causal order. Even where relationships had been significant, causal claims would not be warranted, a particularly important caveat for the one significant pathway found (parasocial trust → purchase intention), which should be read as an association, not a demonstrated cause.

All three constructs were measured through the same self-administered questionnaire, completed by the same respondents in a single sitting, raising the possibility of common-method bias. No statistical procedure was conducted to formally assess this in the present study.

Respondents were purposively recruited from a single university rather than randomly sampled from the broader population of Filipino university students, limiting generalizability even to other students at the same institution. Self-selection is also a factor, since only students who chose to respond are represented.

All data came from one Manila-based private university. Findings may not extend to students at public universities, provincial institutions, or universities without a similarly integrated institutional structure. Replication across multiple institutions and regions would be needed before broader claims about Filipino university students generally could be supported.

The final sample skewed female (56.8%) relative to male (35.2%) and included a comparatively small graduate-level subgroup ($n = 14$, 5.6%) relative to undergraduates (94.4%). No subgroup comparisons were formally tested in this design.

Perceived influencer credibility was measured as a single composite score with questionable internal consistency ($\alpha = .623$) and was operationalized toward influencers as a general category rather than toward a specific, named influencer, both of which may have limited the instrument's ability to detect relationships that more targeted or more reliable measures might reveal.

The study did not measure or control for potentially relevant factors identified in the literature as influencing these relationships elsewhere, including product category, platform used, frequency or intensity of social media use, or alternative antecedents of parasocial trust such as perceived authenticity or relatability.

Whether respondents genuinely followed at least one social media influencer, per the inclusion criteria, relied entirely on self-report at the point of survey entry, with no independent verification.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study received ethics clearance from the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) of a private university in Manila, Philippines, approved on March 2, 2026. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all respondents through a consent statement embedded at the start of the Google Forms questionnaire prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, respondents could withdraw at any point without penalty, and no more than minimal risk was posed to participants.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. This manuscript contains no identifying individual data, images, or direct quotations from respondents.

Availability of Data and Materials

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors' Contributions

Andrea Gwyneth Atento, Colegio de Sto. Domingo de Silos, and Ramon George Atento, PhD, First Asia Institute of Technology and the Humanities.

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