

A study on the mediating effect of brand trust between perceived legitimacy of influencers and attitude toward brand: evidence from Turkey

Perceived
legitimacy of
influencers

2181

Received 21 August 2022
Revised 17 December 2022
26 December 2022
Accepted 26 December 2022

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to test the effect that the perceived legitimacy of influencers has on the attitude toward the brand from the consumer point of view, as well as the mediating effect brand trust has on the relationship between the perceived legitimacy of influencers and attitude toward the brand.

Design/methodology/approach – By using Google Forms to distribute links on various social media platforms, data were collected between January 15, 2021, and February 20, 2021. The population participants were all over 18 and had social media accounts. In the questionnaire, participants were asked to write down three influencers that they followed. They were then asked to answer the other statements in the survey with these three influencers in mind. Participants were included through convenience sampling from the population. A total of 514 people answered the questionnaire. These questions were then subjected to a statistical analysis using PLS-SEM.

Findings – The results showed that cognitive, moral and pragmatic legitimacies significantly affect brand trust. Moreover, the moral and pragmatic legitimacies significantly affect the attitude towards the brand. Regarding the mediation effect, results showed that brand trust has a mediating effect between the perceived legitimacy of influencers and attitude towards the brand.

Research limitations/implications – One of the main limitations of this study is that the data were collected by convenience sampling. Therefore, the research results cannot be generalised. Another limitation is that the study measures general perceptions of influencers' legitimacy, so it has not been addressed in terms of a specific product group, follower or influencer self-branding issues.

Practical implications – The managerial contribution of this research centers on the ability to evaluate the influencers and their legitimacy in society; not only by their follower count but also by the legitimacy factors that can be named under the name of primary legitimacy norms. Managers will then be able to use this framework to determine which influencers they want to work with.

Originality/value – When the literature was reviewed, no study was found that examined and measured the perceived legitimacy of influencers in terms of social norms, values and morals. This research aims to add the concept of the perceived legitimacy of influencers to the discussion in the literature, embody the legitimate framework of influencers' activities and provide a more general conceptual basis for persuasiveness in influencer marketing.

Keywords Cognitive legitimacy, Moral legitimacy, Pragmatic legitimacy, Influencers, Brand trust, Attitude toward the brand

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Digitalization and social media have changed the nature and function of marketing in recent years (Arora *et al.*, 2019). Companies promote their products and services through the personal characteristics of influencers (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2020). Through instant and real-time sharing and the relationship created between influencers and their audience, companies



Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing
and Logistics
Vol. 35 No. 9, 2023
pp. 2181-2197
© Emerald Publishing Limited
1355-5855
DOI 10.1108/APJML-08-2022-0702

This study is a significantly expanded version of the abstract paper presented at the 25th National Marketing Congress in Turkey on July 1, 2021.

have seen an increase in sales (Arora *et al.*, 2019; Kadekova and Holienčinova, 2018; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Consumers can develop a more realistic understanding of what life looks like for different people through the user-centred structure of social media, focused on creating and sharing content (Ye *et al.*, 2021). A critical function of content-sharing is to use it as an advertising tool for real-time sharing about brands or products.

As a result of collaborations between influencers and companies, the influencer market has reached a significant economic level. Regarding the InfluencerMarketingHub (2022), influencer marketing activities grew by \$13.8 billion in 2021, and companies got a return on investment of \$5.78 for every \$1 spent (Geysler, 2022). These numbers show that influencer brings a new method to marketing by separating it from traditional word of mouth (Ye *et al.*, 2021). The economic size of influencer marketing activities has led to various studies on influencer marketing literature (Hudders *et al.*, 2021; Sundermann and Raabe, 2019). When we examine Ye *et al.*'s (2021) bibliometric study, we conclude that the main idea of the classification focuses on the influencer's relationships with consumers, morality, social norms and values. Regarding De Jans *et al.* (2018), children and adolescents do not know whether influencers willingly share their posts and whether they are deceived in this regard. Additionally, many studies cannot reach a clear consensus on whether the influencer's follower count can measure the influencer's credibility and reliability, like count or area of expertise (Breves *et al.*, 2019; De Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Kay *et al.*, 2020; Nafi and Ahmed, 2019).

In this case, a question emerges in influencer marketing literature. Are influencers considered legitimate by consumers? Because legitimacy is one of the conceptual layers in marketing ideology (Marion, 2006) that provides the integration of the marketing actors and facilitates coordination and cooperation relations. Concerning this issue, influencers' relationships with companies are also critical, as well as their relationships with individuals and society. Brand trust, a primary indicator of the influencer-company relationship, helps maintain a company's competitive advantage (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003). Studies about the influencers-brand relationship investigate whether influencers affect the perceived credibility of the brand during the crisis (Singh *et al.*, 2020), the relationship between shared content and the brand (De Jans *et al.*, 2020) and the relationship between the credibility of the influencers and the promoted brand (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Similar studies in the literature (Ye *et al.*, 2021) are mostly related to the personal characteristics of the influencer. Nevertheless, evaluating them as legitimate in terms of social norms and values is also essential. This research focuses on the following two research questions to fill this gap in the literature.

RQ1. What legitimacy factors make the influencer legitimate for the consumer, and do these factors affect the attitude towards the brand?

RQ2. Does the brand trust mediate between legitimacy factors and the attitude towards the brand?

This study aims to discuss influencers' perceived legitimacy and embody the legitimate framework of influencers' activities. Precisely, our study focuses on these contributions: (1) to measure influencers perceived legitimacy, (2) to test the effect of perceived legitimacy on attitude towards the brand and (3) to test the mediating effect of brand trust between perceived legitimacy of influencers and attitude towards the brand. This study is vital in presenting a common conceptual framework that will enable consumers, companies or society to evaluate influencers according to social norms and values and differs from other studies in this respect.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Legitimacy and consumer legitimacy

Suchman (1995) defined legitimacy as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity in society are desirable and accepted as appropriate by the individuals who make

up the society within the norms, values and beliefs determined in the social sphere and framed this concept in three dimensions:

Cognitive legitimacy (CL) focuses on whether the institution is an indispensable and inseparable part of the individual and society regarding social norms and values (Randrianasolo and Arnold, 2020; Suchman, 1995).

Moral legitimacy (ML) can be defined as whether an institution is perceived as morally legitimate based on the values and norms of the society in which the institution operates. It is not based on judgments of whether a particular activity benefits the evaluator but instead on whether the activity is the right thing to do (Suchman, 1995).

Pragmatic legitimacy (PL) can be defined as evaluating the institution's activities and the social consequences based on whether it provides convenience or benefit to the individuals' social life (Suchman, 1995).

According to Marion (2006), legitimacy is a product of marketing ideology, and marketing ideology determines organizing actions that facilitate cooperation and coordination among marketing actors. This legitimacy reflects the harmony between marketers' behaviour and consumers' shared beliefs within the market economy's system of norms, values and definitions (Marion, 2006). Therefore, consumer legitimacy can be defined as whether consumers see companies or organizations as a part of society within a system of certain norms, values, beliefs and definitions (Randrianasolo and Arnold, 2020).

2.2 Influencer marketing and perceived legitimacy of influencers

Influencers who collaborate with companies in different ways have the power to influence the purchasing decisions of consumers and the ability to persuade society (Canöz et al., 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Casalo et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017).

Regular and instant-real-time posting creates a perceived relationship between the consumer and the influencer. Thus, consumers are more likely to accept influencers' brand promotions than traditional advertising (Lou and Yuan, 2019) because studies show that consumers resist brands' traditional manipulative advertising efforts (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Singh et al., 2020). The main reason for this situation is that consumers consider the influencers more reliable because they share real-life posts (De Jans et al., 2018).

According to Taillon et al. (2020), consumers evaluate influencers based on credibility and their perceptions of other characteristics such as attractiveness, likability, similarity and familiarity. Nevertheless, the main question that has not yet been asked in influencer marketing is, which legitimate norms and values of society make influencers legitimate? Whether influencers are seen as legitimate by consumers can directly relate to consumers' trust in the brands advertised by the influencer, especially because trust is critical for building successful and long-term relationships with the company and brand (Chahal and Rani, 2017).

2.3 Perceived legitimacy of influencers and brand trust

Brand trust can be defined as the consumer's evaluation of the brand's ability to perform (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Ye et al. (2021) show that ethical issues and disclosure activities are one of the most studied issues in influencer marketing. This shows us that from a consumer point of view, credibility problems exist regarding companies, brands and the influencers they cooperate with. In uncertain virtual environments, when existing rules do not meet consumers' expectations, trust is described as a set of implicit beliefs that no one benefits from the uncertainties of the current situation. These explanations show that gaining trust is crucial in any virtual community activity (Ebrahim, 2020).

Mabkhot *et al.* (2017) found that brand trust significantly mediated the relationship between brand personality and brand loyalty. Anaya-Sánchez *et al.* (2020) also reveal that brand trust affects repurchase and positive e-WOM behaviours directly and indirectly through trust in online virtual communities. Ebrahim (2020) mentions that brand trust guides the measurement of trust in social media marketing. Other research shows that the brand content posted by an influencer positively affects brand trust, which is driven by the influencer's attractiveness, credibility and reliability (Lou and Yuan, 2019). So hypotheses are as follows.

- H1a. Perceived cognitive legitimacy (PCL) of influencers has a positive effect on brand trust.
- H1b. Perceived moral legitimacy (PML) of influencers has a positive effect on brand trust.
- H1c. Perceived pragmatic legitimacy (PPL) of influencers has a positive effect on brand trust.

2.4 Brand trust and attitude toward the brand

Attitude towards the brand refers to the consumers' internal evaluation of the brand and their purchase intention (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Studies show that companies' social media marketing activities (Abzari *et al.*, 2014) and social networking sites (Wang *et al.*, 2019) have a significant effect on the attitude towards the brand. Several researchers have shown that brand trust moderates the relationship between brand engagement and loyalty and brand engagement and equity (Chahal and Rani, 2017; Sánchez-Franco *et al.*, 2015). So following hypothesis is.

- H2. Brand trust affects the attitude towards the brand promoted by the influencer.

2.5 Perceived legitimacy of influencers and attitude towards the brand

Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020) evaluated the legitimacy concept from the consumer point of view regarding social norms and values and introduced consumer legitimacy to literature. Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020) measured consumer legitimacy as pragmatic, moral and cognitive. Their results showed that while moral legitimacy significantly affects attitude towards the firm, pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy has no significant effect on attitude towards the firm.

Chung *et al.* (2016) emphasized that communication between an organization and society is critical because communication is vital in gaining legitimacy and reflects social values and expectations. Influencers are an essential marketing communication tool (Zatwarnicka-Madura *et al.*, 2022). However, existing studies are mainly about the personal characteristics of influencers, such as credibility (Fink *et al.*, 2020; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020), attractiveness (Torres *et al.*, 2019; Trivedi and Sama, 2020) and expertise (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Ki and Kim, 2019) rather than their perceived legitimacy on social norms and values.

As a result, the following hypotheses are.

- H3a. PCL of influencers positively affects the attitude towards the brand promoted by the influencer.
- H3b. PML of influencers positively affects the attitude towards the brand promoted by the influencer.
- H3c. PPL of influencers positively affects the attitude towards the brand promoted by the influencer.

2.6 The mediating role of brand trust

Ebrahim (2020) tests the mediating effect of brand trust between social media activities and brand loyalty while considering that a company's social media activities should be based on trust. When a consumer trusts a brand, they are more likely to remember the brand name and are less likely to switch to competing brands (Pintado *et al.*, 2017). Studies show that brand trust affects purchasing behaviours (Pentina *et al.*, 2013; Warner-Söderholm *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, scholars have empirically proven that brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing activities and behavioural intentions (Chahal and Rani, 2017; Ebrahim, 2020; Kim and Park, 2013; Kemeç and Yüksel, 2021). In this context, the hypotheses are as follows:

Brand trust mediates the relationship between.

H4a. The PCL of influencers and attitude towards the brand,

H4b. The PML of influencers and attitude towards the brand,

H4c. The PPL of influencers and attitude towards the brand.

Within the framework of all these studies, the model of the research and the representation of the hypotheses are as in (Figure 1):

3. Methodology

This study aims to test the effect that the perceived legitimacy of influencers has on the consumer's attitude toward the brand, as well as the mediating effect of brand trust between this relationship of the perceived legitimacy of influencers and the attitude toward the brand. Analyses were made using the PLS-SEM method. We used PLS-SEM, because it works well with large sample sizes and research distribution issues, such as normality (Hair *et al.*, 2012, 2019; Nitzl, 2016). Another reason is that PLS-SEM solves the entire system of equations simultaneously without independently estimating the parameters of each equation. In addition, SEM considers random measurement error when estimating related effects involving latent variables (Hayes *et al.*, 2017).

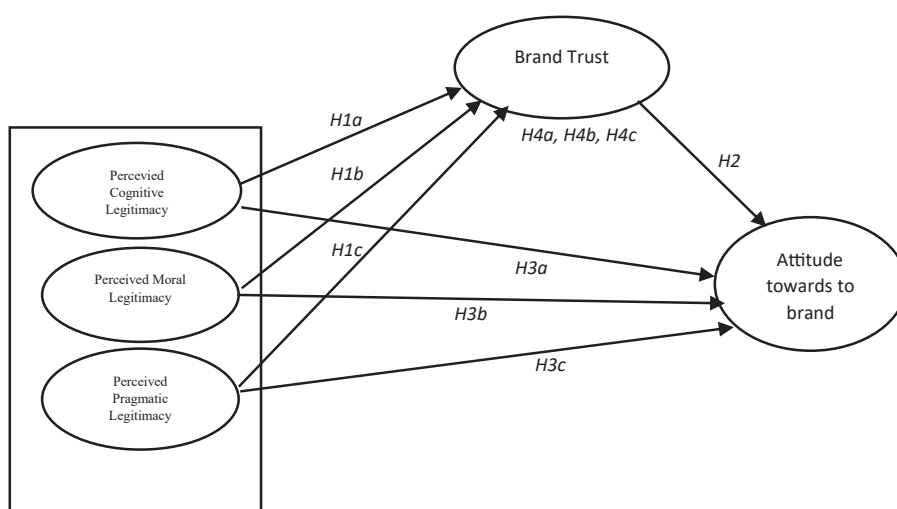


Figure 1.
Proposed model

3.1 Sampling and data collection

Data were collected between January 15, 2021 and February 20, 2021, by distributing the questionnaire links on various social media channels via Google Forms. The population consists of participants over 18 years old with social media accounts. Convenience sampling was used due to participants' accessibility (Bell *et al.*, 2022; Tsen and Cheng, 2021) because the questionnaires were sent to participants over the Internet (Instagram, Twitter and e-mail). In addition to the accessibility of the recruited participants, relevant criteria were identified. Since convenience sampling is non-probabilistic, it does not allow for the generalization of results (Malhotra and Birks, 2007). To overcome these disadvantages, at the very beginning of the survey, we asked the respondents to write the names of three influencers and answer the other questions in the study by considering the influencers' activities. The answers of 514 participants who completely answered the questions were analyzed.

3.2 Measures

The perceived legitimacy of influencers was adapted from the study done by Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020). It consisted of 12 three-dimensional items, namely PCL, PML and PPL and was measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The brand trust was adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and was measured with the help of a 5-point Likert-type scale. The attitude towards the brand scale was adapted from Patel *et al.* (2017) using semantic differential scores. A pilot study was conducted on 27 participants formed by academics and other users who follow influencers on their social media accounts. The questionnaire tested whether the expressions expressed the structure and was finalized with the feedback received from the participants.

3.3 Common method bias

Procedural and statistical methods were used to control common method bias in the study (Jordan and Troth, 2020; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Before starting to collect data, and in order to avoid common method bias that may arise from the participants, the first page of the questionnaire emphasized that names should not be mentioned. The questionnaire also informed participants that the survey data would be relayed to the researcher's account without any identifying information. Therefore, procedural assurance was given to ensure that participant information and research data confidentiality will not be shared with third parties. Thus, the probability of participants responding in an artificial or dishonest way was reduced (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

An exploratory factor analysis was performed using Harman's single-factor method (Fuller *et al.*, 2016; Jordan and Troth, 2020) to evaluate common method bias. In PLS-SEM studies, Harman's single-factor test is used to measure common method bias (Ylitalo, 2009). In order to avoid common method bias, a single factor should not be dominant and the explained variance values should not be higher than 50%. According to the test in SPSS, when all variables were collected in a single factor, the factor score was 49%. Since it is below 50%, it can be said that there is no common method bias. Secondly, VIF values were checked using the PLS-SEM method. If all VIF in the inner model resulting from a full collinearity test is equal to or lower than 3.3 (Table 6), the model can be considered free of common method bias (Kock, 2015).

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the findings related to the demographic characteristics of the participants. 82.1% of the participants in the research are women. According to the TUIK (2022) report, the

	f	%		f	%
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Education level</i>		
Female	422	82.1	Primary School	23	4.5
Male	92	17.9	High School	165	32.1
<i>Age</i>			Two-year Degree	96	18.6
18–25	232	45.1	Undergraduate	196	38.1
26–35	206	40.1	Postgraduate	34	6.6
36–45	62	12.1	<i>Occupation</i>		
46 and above	14	2.7	Employee	55	10.7
<i>Marital Status</i>			Officer	52	10.1
Married	228	44.3	Craft/Tradesman	8	1.6
Single	286	55.7	Self-employment	30	5.8
<i>Income level*</i>			Student	131	25.5
2,500 TL and below	178	34.6	Housewife	82	16.0
2,501–4,500 TL	190	37.0	Unemployed	79	15.4
4,501–6,500 TL	86	16.7	Academician	11	2.1
6,501–8,500 TL	27	5.3	Retired	6	1.2
8,501 TL and above	33	6.4	Others	60	11.6

Note(s): *Turkish Liras

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of participants

rate of participation in social networks (creating user profiles, sending messages or other contributions) is 82%, women. Thus, while the predominance of women in the research sample seems highly skewed, it appears to be compatible with the general statistics in Turkey. Regarding age, 45.1% of the sample is comprised of participants between 18 and 25 and 40.1% between 26 and 35 years. Regarding education level, 38.1% of undergraduate and 32.1% of high school graduates participated in the research.

4.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Table 2 shows the findings related to confirmatory factor analysis. According to Hair *et al.* (2014), if the factor load of an expression is below 0.708, but if the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) values of the structure representing this expression are above the threshold value, it does not need to be removed from the analysis. The factor load of the statement “The social media influencer I follow is an indispensable part of social media for me” the factor load of the cognitive legitimacy dimension of the statement is below 0.708. However, CR value of the structure representing this expression is above 0.7, and AVE is above 0.5, so the item was not excluded from the analysis. Since the AVE and CR values of the other structures are above the threshold values, it is possible to say that the convergent validity of the scales is acceptable and provided in Table 3. Since the Cronbach Alpha coefficients for the dimensions and the convergent validity coefficients (CR) above the threshold value of 0.7, the reliability or internal consistency of the scales is ensured (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

The first stage of convergent validity is the conformity of the constructs to the Fornell and Larcker criteria. Table 3 presents information on this criterion. The dark numbers, seen diagonally in the table, show the square roots of the AVE values, while the other values show the correlation coefficients of the variables. According to the criteria put forward by Fornell and Larcker, the correlation coefficients of the variables with each other should be smaller than the AVE value representing the same structure (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Therefore, considering the values in Table 3, it can be said that the Fornell-Larcker criterion was met.

The second stage of discriminant validity is the evaluation of cross-loads and factor loadings. The values in bold in Table 4 are the factor loads of the variables, while the other

	Factor loadings	Cronbach alpha	CR	AVE
<i>Perceived cognitive legitimacy (PCL)</i>				
The social media influencer I follow				
PCL1- is a complementary member of the community that follows it	0.802	0.798	0.868	0.623
PCL2- is a vital community member that follows her/him	0.873			
PCL3- is an indispensable part of social media	0.673			
PCL4- represents the community of followers I am a member of	0.797			
<i>Perceived Moral legitimacy (PML)</i>				
The social media influencer I follow is				
PML1- honest	0.911	0.925	0.947	0.816
PML2- reliable	0.936			
PML3- respectable	0.925			
PML4- knowledgeable	0.839			
<i>Perceived pragmatic legitimacy (PPL)</i>				
The posts of the social media influencer I follow generally				
PPL1- benefit for me about the products	0.873	0.902	0.931	0.772
PPL2- about the products, in general, are suitable for my lifestyle	0.917			
PPL3- about the products are suitable for the lifestyle of those who follow him/her	0.875			
PPL4- about the products, reflect the practical values of those who follow him/her daily	0.848			
<i>Brand trust (BT)</i>				
BT1- I trust the brand whose products are shared by the influencers I follow	0.947	0.939	0.957	0.848
BT2-I believe in the brand whose products are shared by the influencers I follow	0.954			
BT3- The brand whose products are shared by the influencers is an honest brand	0.956			
BT4- The brand whose products are shared by the influencers is safe	0.819			
<i>Attitude towards the brand (ATTBrand)</i>				
Brands advertised by social media influencers				
ATTbrand1- Unconvincing- convincing	0.805	0.912	0.934	0.740
ATTbrand2-Boring-entertaining	0.839			
ATTbrand3-Bad- good	0.888			
ATTbrand4- Unpleasant - pleasant	0.903			
ATTbrand5- Disadvantageous- advantageous	0.861			

Table 2.
Confirmatory factor analysis results

	PCL	PML	PPL	ATTBrand	BT
PCL	0.790				
PML	0.645	0.903			
PPL	0.655	0.748	0.879		
ATTBrand	0.333	0.368	0.375	0.860	
BT	0.620	0.692	0.733	0.494	0.921

Table 3.
Fornell and Larcker's discriminant validity results

	PCM	PML	PPL	ATTBrand	BT
PCL1	0.802	0.592	0.546	0.309	0.514
PCL2	0.873	0.520	0.537	0.326	0.527
PCL3	0.673	0.340	0.364	0.105	0.369
PCL4	0.797	0.543	0.586	0.260	0.523
PML1	0.589	0.911	0.668	0.349	0.655
PML2	0.608	0.936	0.730	0.350	0.670
PML3	0.606	0.925	0.681	0.325	0.628
PML4	0.522	0.839	0.619	0.305	0.537
PPL1	0.568	0.678	0.873	0.368	0.667
PPL2	0.592	0.691	0.917	0.356	0.662
PPL3	0.559	0.625	0.875	0.282	0.637
PPL4	0.582	0.632	0.848	0.305	0.607
BT1	0.572	0.672	0.705	0.479	0.947
BT2	0.584	0.656	0.690	0.470	0.954
BT3	0.576	0.655	0.703	0.481	0.956
BT4	0.553	0.558	0.595	0.382	0.819
ATTBrand1	0.267	0.306	0.298	0.805	0.404
ATTBrand2	0.221	0.250	0.294	0.839	0.378
ATTBrand3	0.299	0.358	0.345	0.888	0.435
ATTBrand4	0.276	0.321	0.335	0.903	0.435
ATTBrand5	0.353	0.335	0.335	0.861	0.461

Table 4.
Factor loadings and cross loadings

values represent the cross-loads. Yildiz (2020) states that if there is a minimum difference of 0.1 as the critical value between the factor loads of each variable and the other cross-loads, the items related to the expressions cannot be considered overlapping items. Table 4 shows a minimum difference of 0.1 between the cross-loads and factor loads; thus, there were no overlapping items.

The last step in assessing the discriminant validity is to meet the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion. Table 5 indicates information on this criterion. The HTMT coefficient should theoretically be less than 0.9 for closer concepts and less than 0.85 for distant concepts (Henseler *et al.*, 2016). All values are below the specified threshold values, so all three stages of discriminant validity were met.

4.3 Hypothesis testing

Structural equation modelling using the partial least squares method (PLS-SEM) was used to test direct and indirect effects, the research model and hypotheses. Table 6 shows the results of the analysis regarding the research model.

The R^2 value expresses the rate at which the independent variable explains the dependent variable, where a value between 0.25–0.49 is weak, between 0.50–0.74 it is medium, 0.75 and above indicates a high level of explanatory power by Hair *et al.* (2011). Yildiz (2020) states that

	PCL	PML	PPL	ATTBrand	BT
PCL					
PML	0.734				
PPL	0.759	0.817			
ATTBrand	0.368	0.397	0.410		
BT	0.709	0.739	0.796	0.530	

Table 5.
Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) results for discriminant validity

calculating the R^2 as 10% may also be sufficient, and the SmartPLS program also recommends that 0.10 is sufficient. When the R^2 values of the legitimacy factors (independent variables) were examined, the independent variables explained the attitude towards the brand at 24% and the brand trust at 60%. In this case, it can be said that the legitimacy factors explain the attitude towards the brand at a weak level and the brand trust at a moderate level. Thus, the attitude towards the brand has a weak explanatory power, and the brand trust has a medium explanatory power.

Blindfolding analysis was performed to determine the Q^2 effect values of the research model. Hair *et al.* (2014) mention that if the Q^2 value is greater than zero, the model can predict endogenous variables. As a result of the blindfolding analysis, Table 6 shows Q^2 value for the attitude towards the brand was 0.177, and the Q^2 value for the brand trust was 0.504. Therefore, the model has the power to predict endogenous variables.

The effect size values (f^2) are another indicator that needs to be evaluated and can be found in Table 6. Sarstedt *et al.* (2017) stated that f^2 values below 0.02 are insignificant. Accordingly, it is possible to say that the influence of cognitive legitimacy ($f^2 = 0.001$), moral legitimacy ($f^2 = 0.001$) and pragmatic legitimacy ($f^2 = 0.000$) variables' on brand trust is insignificant. The low effect size coefficients are due to indirect effects. Cohen (1992), states that the magnitude of the effect value is low if it is 0.02 and above, medium if it is 0.15 and above and high if it is 0.35 and above. The power of trust in the brand to affect the attitude towards the brand ($f^2 = 0.108$) is at a low level. In addition, cognitive legitimacy ($f^2 = 0.039$) and moral legitimacy ($f^2 = 0.070$) had a low influence on attitude toward the brand; it is seen that the power of pragmatic legitimacy ($f^2 = 0.173$) to affect the attitude towards the brand is at a medium level.

Another value in Table 6 is VIF (Variance Inflation Factor), which shows whether there is a multicollinearity problem or not. According to Hair *et al.* (2010), the VIF value may be below 5, and according to Diamantopoulos and Sigauw (2006), it may be below 3. Table 6 shows that the variables do not indicate a multicollinearity problem in VIF values.

The effects of the variables were measured by selecting 5,000 sub-samples with the bootstrapping method, and the direct effects are given in Table 7.

Table 6.
Research model results

Hypothesis		VIF	Q^2	f^2	R^2
H1a	PCL → BT	1.934	0.504	0.001	0.600
H1b	PML → BT	2.511		0.001	
H1c	PPL → BT	2.567		0.000	
H2	BT → ATTBrand	2.497	0.177	0.108	0.246
H3a	PCL → ATTBrand	2.009		0.039	
H3b	PML → ATTBrand	2.686		0.070	
H3c	PPL → ATTBrand	3.010		0.173	

Table 7.
Direct effects

Path analysis (Hypothesis)	Standart beta	Sta. Dev	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	
H1a	PCL → BT	0.173	0.053	3.291	0.001
H1b	PML → BT	0.265	0.063	4.212	0.000
H1c	PPL → BT	0.422	0.064	6.598	0.000
H2	BT → ATTBrand	0.452	0.061	7.387	0.000
H3a	PCL → ATTBrand	0.109	0.061	1.781	0.085
H3b	PML → ATTBrand	0.160	0.060	2.658	0.008
H3c	PPL → ATTBrand	0.184	0.062	2.928	0.004

According to Table 7, cognitive legitimacy ($\beta = 0.173; p < 0.001$), moral legitimacy ($\beta = 0.265; p < 0.001$) and pragmatic legitimacy ($\beta = 0.422; p < 0.000$) have significant effects on brand trust, and brand trust has significant effects on the attitude towards the brand ($\beta = 0.452; p < 0.000$). Thus, H1a, H1b, H1c and H2 are supported. Moreover, while cognitive legitimacy does not affect the attitude towards the brand ($\beta = 0.109; p > 0.085$), moral ($\beta = 0.169; p > 0.008$) and pragmatic legitimacy ($\beta = 0.184; p > 0.004$) affect the attitude towards the brand. So H3a is not supported, while H3b and H3c are.

According to Zhao et al. (2010), if the indirect effects are significant between variables in the mediating effect analysis, it is possible to talk about the mediating effect (Yildiz, 2020). The path analysis in Table 8 shows the indirect effects. The indirect effects of all dimensions on the perceived legitimacy of influencers are significant (pPCL<0.002; pPML<0.000; pPPL<0.000). It can also be seen that the direct effect of the cognitive dimension of the perceived legitimacy of influencers on the attitude towards the brand is not significant (pPCL>0.085), while the direct effects of the moral and pragmatic dimensions on the attitude towards the brand are significant (pPML<0.008; pPPL<0.004). In this case, regarding the mediating effect decision tree by Zhao et al. (2010), it can be stated that brand trust has a full mediating effect on the relationship between cognitive legitimacy and attitude toward the brand. Meanwhile, brand trust partially integrative mediates the relationship between moral and pragmatic legitimacy and attitude towards the brand (Yildiz, 2020, p. 132). Thus, H4a, H4b and H4c were supported for the mediating effect of the brand trust variable.

Figure 2 shows the regression coefficients are between 0.673–0.873 for PCL, 0.839–0.936 for PML, 0.848–0.917 for PPL, 0.805–0.903 for PPL attitude towards the brand and 0.819–0.956 for brand trust.

Path analysis (Hypothesis)	Standart beta	Sta. Dev	t	p
H4a PCL → BT → ATTBrand	0.078	0.026	3.003	0.002
H4b PML → BT → ATTBrand	0.120	0.032	3.708	0.000
H4c PPL → BT → ATTBrand	0.190	0.040	4.731	0.000

Table 8. Indirect effects

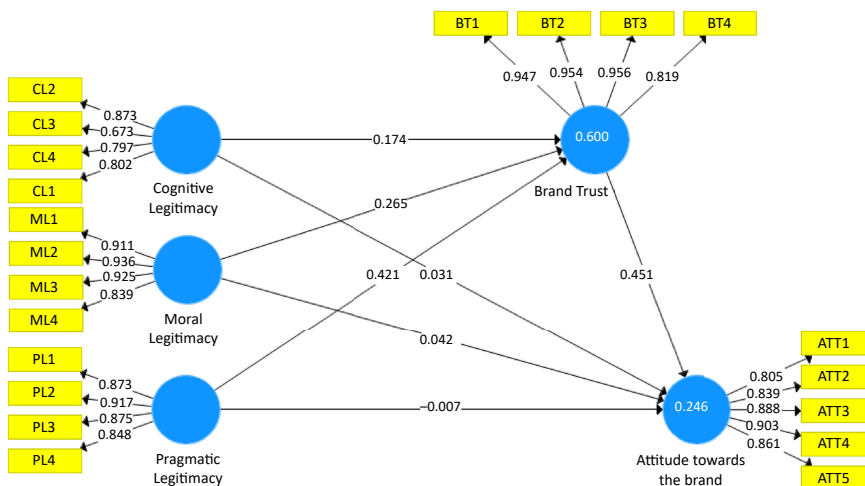


Figure 2. PLS-SEM results

5. Discussion and conclusion

We found that the perception of legitimacy towards influencers has a positive effect on brand trust and brand trust affects the consumers' attitude towards the brand. While cognitive legitimacy does not have a statistically significant effect on the attitude towards the brand, other legitimacy factors do. This study's results are similar to [Randrianasolo and Arnold's \(2020\)](#) research because both reached that moral legitimacy affects consumer attitudes.

Results show that consumers consider all legitimacy factors in order to be able to trust the brand promoted by influencers. Findings support that this perception of trust based on legitimacy is also crucial regarding attitude toward the brand. However, consumers think that the basis of these attitudes may not include cognitive legitimacy while determining their attitude towards the brand. Nevertheless, what they consider necessary is the influencer's moral legitimacy.

According to [Lou and Yuan's \(2019\)](#) results, the credibility of influencers and the content of their messages affect consumer trust. In our research model, results show that brand trust mediates the relationship between the legitimacy factors and attitude towards the brand, which can give a more inclusive basis to the results of [Lou and Yuan \(2019\)](#) and [Chahal and Rani \(2017\)](#).

[Sohail et al. \(2020\)](#) show that social media marketing elements were positively associated with brand trust. Our study results show that the positive relationship between the perception of the legitimacy of influencers (as a marketing actor) and brand trust supports the findings of their study. Brand trust fully mediates the relationship between attitude towards the brand and the cognitive legitimacy of the respondents. This result means that the respondents should trust the brand to have an attitude towards the brand.

Brand trust partially affects on the relationship between moral and pragmatic legitimacy and attitude towards the brand. This result shows that the respondents may have an attitude towards the brand only in terms of whether the influencer is seen as legitimate or not, without considering brand trust. In this case, investigating the legitimacy principles together with the source-credibility ([Breves et al., 2019](#)) and source-attractiveness ([Lim et al., 2017](#)) models could explain why consumers see influencers as moral and pragmatic without trusting the brand. This study, which reveals the significant effect of the moral and pragmatic legitimacy on attitude towards the brand, is remarkable in that it can contribute to the theory of reasoned action applied by [Copeland and Zhao \(2020\)](#) regarding social media marketing. Results also support the findings of [Ebrahim \(2020\)](#) that brand trust mediates the causal relationship between brand loyalty and brand equity in social media marketing activities.

[Pradhan et al. \(2022\)](#) studied how Gen Z'ers reacted to an influencer making a perceived moral transgression. The findings showed that the reactions were connected to the relationship with the influencer, and if the relationship was weak, the Gen Z follower was more likely to distance themselves. These study results are also parallel with this result because influencers' perceived moral legitimacy affects consumers' attitudes toward the brand.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

[Marion \(2006\)](#) states that ensuring the continuity of marketing legitimacy requires constant repetition of the promises of the marketing concept. Understanding how consumers provide legitimacy or social acceptance to organizations is crucial for consumers, marketers and academics ([Shin and Yoon, 2018](#); [Randrianasolo and Arnold, 2020](#)). Since this research is based on the social legitimacy of influencers, unlike the source-credibility and source-attractiveness models, the acceptability of influencers in society gives a more fundamental conceptual structure for the continuity of brands and companies.

[Wellman et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that influencer marketing is not inherently unethical but rather that the ethical principles that guide the production of sponsored content are not well understood. This study rests on a conceptual ground that includes this proposition in ethical legitimacy.

5.2 Managerial implications

This research offers perspective to managers on the categorical foundations for strategies that can be applied to how companies can gain social legitimacy through influencers. Managers will have the opportunity to determine their companies' communication and marketing policies by measuring the perceived legitimacy of influencers.

Also, in this study, moral legitimacy perceptions affect consumers' attitudes towards the brand. In this case, managers should evaluate influencers based on personalistic authenticity-based ethical values and moral legitimacy based on social norms and values while collaborating with influencers and addressing target markets.

5.3 Limitations and future research

One of the main limitations of this study is using convenience sampling. We used convenience sampling because it is difficult to determine when a brand collaborates with which influencers. In addition, influencers can sometimes collaborate with different brands on the same day. As a result, the research results cannot be generalized.

Similar research should be considered regarding different product groups or levels of interest in future studies. The proposed research model can be developed by including variables like consumer scepticism and brand image (Figure 1).

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