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The effect of influencer interactivity on customer brand engagement: An interactivity theory perspective

Efectos de la interactividad en el compromiso del cliente para con las marcas: Una perspectiva de la teoría de la interactividad

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Abstract

TikTok has become highly popular among young consumers, offering a valuable platform for brands to partner with influencers. This paper investigates the effect of TikTok fashion influencer interactivity on brand and behavioural outcomes of young consumers. The quantitative data were collected from 233 TikTok fashion influencer followers, using convenience sampling technique. The relationships among variables were tested using structural equation modelling Smart PLS 4.0 and

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the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 28. The results indicate that influencer interactivity has a positive and significant effect on brand credibility. Furthermore, brand credibility significantly and positively influenced customer brand engagement. Customer brand engagement is found to be a significant mediate between brand image and purchase intention. Leveraging interactive influencers can enhance brand credibility, and as brand credibility increases, so will customer brand engagement, brand image and purchase intention. These findings can guide marketers to make informed decisions when choosing effective interactive influencers. This study provides a better understanding of the impact of influencer interactivity which will be helpful to marketers in developing an effective TikTok marketing strategy. This study contributes the influencer marketing literature by proposing a model to understand how influencer interactivity can influence behavioural outcomes.

Keywords
Customer brand engagement; influencer marketing; social media influencer; interactivity; TikTok; young consumers.

Resumen
TikTok se ha hecho muy popular entre los consumidores jóvenes, ofreciendo una valiosa plataforma para que las marcas se asocien con influyentes. Este artículo investiga el efecto de la interactividad de los influencers de moda en TikTok sobre la marca y el comportamiento de los jóvenes consumidores. de los consumidores jóvenes. Los datos cuantitativos se recogieron de 233 seguidores de *influencers* de moda de TikTok, utilizando la técnica de muestreo por conveniencia. de conveniencia. Las relaciones entre las variables se comprobaron mediante el modelo de ecuaciones estructurales Smart PLS 4.0 y y el paquete estadístico *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* versión 28. Los resultados indican que la interactividad de las personas influyentes tiene un efecto positivo y significativo en la credibilidad de la marca. efecto positivo y significativo en la credibilidad de la marca. Además, la credibilidad de la marca influye positiva y significativamente en el compromiso de los clientes con la marca. del cliente. El compromiso del cliente con la marca es un mediador significativo entre la imagen de marca y la intención de compra.
El uso de personas influyentes interactivas puede mejorar la credibilidad de la marca y, a medida que ésta aumente, también lo harán el compromiso, la imagen de marca y la intención de compra. la imagen de marca y la intención de compra. Estas conclusiones pueden orientar a los profesionales del marketing a la hora de a la hora de elegir influenciadores interactivos eficaces. Este estudio permite comprender mejor el impacto de la interactividad de los influyentes. que será útil para los profesionales del marketing a la hora de desarrollar una estrategia eficaz de marketing en TikTok. Este estudio contribuye al conocimiento de la literatura de marketing de *influencers* proponiendo un modelo para entender cómo la interactividad de los *influencers* puede influir en los resultados de comportamiento.

Palabras clave
Compromiso; consumidor; cliente; influencers; interactividad; jóvenes; marca; marketing; redes sociales; TikTok.

1. Introduction

A social media influencer (SMI) is an individual who has established credibility and a large following on social media platforms (The Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). The purpose of an influencer is to persuade and motivate the opinions and purchasing decisions of their followers through their expertise, authenticity, and the trust they have built with their audience. They are effectively used as a form of communication from a brand to its target audience (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022), as they use their online presence to promote products, services, or causes to their followers (Malek and Ligaraba, 2020). As an industry, influencer marketing has expanded exponentially and was valued at $21.1 billion in 2023 (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Brands are increasingly collaborating with influencers in an attempt to promote products or services to the SMIs followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022). Brand engagement has become an essential indicator for evaluating influencer marketing effectiveness (Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019). The level of influence an individual has as a social media influencer is often measured by the size of their following, engagement rates, and the impact of their content on their audience. 56% of brands prefer TikTok over other platforms for influencer marketing (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Thus,

influencer marketing on TikTok has become a popular and effective way for businesses to reach their target audience.

TikTok has become an essential tool for influencer marketing in the fashion industry (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019). With a user base of 1.05 billion, it offers a powerful platform for brand awareness and consumer engagement (Rahmawati *et al.*, 2023). Customer engagement serves as a crucial metric for measuring the effectiveness of influencer advertisements, as it involves the active participation of consumers in sharing advertisements and generating value (Gu and Duan, 2024). Influencer marketing, particularly on TikTok, can reach consumers with diverse fashion sensibilities through sponsorships and endorsements, helping brands build brand identity and enhance purchase intentions (Ruby, 2023).

2. Justification of Research Gap

Influencers are seen as tools that communicate and engage with the brands target audience (Bu *et al.*, 2022). This is because viewers and followers are likely to follow and influencers recommendations in industries including fashion, lifestyle, photography, and travel (Casaló *et al.*, 2020; Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). Researchers Bozkurt, Gligor and Babin (2021) highlighted that when customers perceive a brand as highly interactive on social media, they are more likely to purchase the brand's products, refer the brand in exchange for monetary incentives, share information about the brand with family and friends on social media, and offer feedback and suggestions for improving the brand, as the same point of view of authors such as Olubusola, Usman and Tosin in 2022, just a year later.

Influencers are proven to create closer relationships with their audience than celebrities, thus stimulating a more credible relationship (Johnstone and Lindh, 2022). Influencer marketing has grown rapidly in recent years (Emmanouilidou and Christodoulides, 2021), with more brands than ever before using influencers to reach their target audiences. Despite the growth of influencer marketing, few academic studies have investigated the role of interactivity in the context of influencers (Jun and Yi, 2020; Garnès, 2019).

Brands are also increasingly investing in influencer marketing. The expenditure being made available for influencer marketing is increasing (Rieldla and Von Luckwald, 2019). 63% of companies increased their marketing budget allocation to influencer marketing during 2020, a rise of 59% compared to the previous year (Martínez-Lopez *et al.*, 2020). As influencer marketing budgets continue to increase, there is a growing need for research to measure the return on investment (ROI) of these campaigns and to understand the factors that contribute to their success (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021). This shows how influencer marketing strategies are becoming more common and thus more research on the topic is need, in order to ensure it is effective.

When a brand is seen to create content for SMIs, credibility of the influencer is decreased as shown by Xie and Feng (2022). Further research is done to determine how influencer marketing creates positive consumer behaviour (Jin *et al.*, 2019). These studies and linked as they focus on diverse traits, of SMIs, that impact consumer behaviour. However, Vrontis *et al.*, (2021) showed that empirical findings are scattered, and the linkages are not examined. Zhou *et al.*, (2020) showed that sponsorship disclosure negatively affects credibility and trust.

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TikTok has become the fastest growing social network and has been downloaded more than any other application worldwide in both 2020 and 2021, with a total of 1506 million downloads. This figure is significantly higher than Instagram's 1048 million downloads (Wiley, 2021). Despite the increased usage of influencer marketing on TikTok, limited academic literature is found on the effect of influencer marketing on this platform. Studies were conducted to investigate the effects of influencer marketing on brands and purchase behaviour on social media platforms such as Instagram (Tafesse and Wood, 2021), Facebook (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, and Dwivedi, 2019), Twitter (Lahuer- ta-Otero and Cordero-Guti´errez, 2016) and YouTube (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). This shows that there is insufficient research on influencer marketing on TikTok.

According to Haenlein *et al.*, (2020), TikTok is the go-to social network for teenagers and young people, with a particularly strong appeal for this demographic. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, whose users are typically around 40 years old, and Instagram, which tends to attract people in their 30s, TikTok's user base is much younger, with 40% of users between the ages of 10 and 19. This age difference is significant because younger people have different media consumption habits and are less responsive to traditional advertising method (Xu *et al.*, 2021). As a result of increasing popularity, unique format and content characteristics, and ability to directly reach younger consumers, TikTok can be leveraged as a channel for influencer marketing by brands. This shows that TikTok influencing specifically needs to be examined to determine its effects on young consumers (as the majority of its users fall into this category). Despite Influencer marketing becoming increasingly popular along with the usage of TikTok, little research has been done to understand the role of TikTok Influencer interactivity and how behavioural outcomes.

Research Question: To what extent does TikTok fashion influencer interactivity influence brand and behavioural outcomes of young adults?

3. Literature review

3.1. Fashion industry and social media influencers

In recent years, the fashion industry has experienced significant transformations due to the rise of social media and the emergence of fashion influencers. According to Duffett (2017) and Jiménez-Marín, Sanz-Marcos and Tobar-Pesantez (2021), social media influencers have the power to shape consumer perceptions, preferences, and decision-making processes. This influence has led to significant transformations in how consumers engage with brands and make fashion-related choices.

TikTok has become a viable platform for influencer marketing campaigns due to its vast user base and high engagement levels (Mariani *et al.*, 2021). Brands leverage the influence of TikTok fashion influencers to reach young adults and influence their fashion-related preferences and purchasing decisions.

3.2. TikTok fashion influencers

Fashion influencers play a pivotal role in shaping and driving fashion trends on TikTok. Their ability to create engaging and relatable content has attracted a massive following, and they have become trusted

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sources of fashion inspiration for many users (Kanaveedu and Kalapurackal, 2022). The interactive nature of TikTok fosters engagement and dialogue, enabling influencers to establish genuine connections with their followers. As a result, consumers perceive TikTok influencers as relatable and trustworthy sources of fashion inspiration, leading them to be more receptive to their recommendations. Moreover, TikTok's seamless integration of e-commerce functionalities enhances the consumer's path to purchase.

3.3. TikTok fashion influencers in South Africa

TikTok has experienced exponential growth in South Africa, with a substantial increase in user adoption and engagement (Inc.Africa, 2023). TikTok has proven to be an effective platform for influencer marketing campaigns targeting audiences in South Africa. According to the Influencer Marketing Hub (2021), the engagement rates on TikTok in South Africa are significantly higher compared to other social media platforms. This indicates that TikTok users in South Africa are actively interacting with content, including influencer-driven campaigns, thereby demonstrating the platform's effectiveness in capturing and retaining audience attention. Advertising spending in the Influencer Advertising market in South Africa is expected to show an annual growth rate of 11.60%, resulting in a projected market volume of $37.38 million by 2027 (Statista, 2023).

A comparative study by Belanche *et al.*, (2021) examined the antecedents and consequences of fashion influencer identification and found that consumers in South Africa, like their counterparts in other countries, identify and engage with fashion influencers on social media platforms. Mariani *et al.*, (2021) conducted a study exploring the impact of TikTok on fashion consumption and found that the algorithm-driven content recommendation system on TikTok influences South African users' fashion preferences and purchase decisions. This demonstrates the platform's ability to shape consumer attitudes and behaviors towards fashion products. Building on the approach taken by Jiménez-Marín and Checa (2021), we can affirm that, in this sense, the consequences of the identification of influencers on consumer behaviour are based on the recommendations obtained, generating conclusive purzchasing decisions.

3.4. Influencer interactivity and brand engagement

When influencers actively engage with their audience on social media or other platforms, it creates a more dynamic and authentic relationship between the influencer, the brand, and the audience. This engagement not only benefits the influencer but also enhances the overall brand experience for consumers. Bozkurt *et al.*, (2021) found that customers' perceptions of brands' social media interactivity impact customer engagement.

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4. Theoretical grounding

4.1. The Interactivity Theory

The Interactivity Theory was introduced by Rafaeli (1988). Rafelli (1998) described interactivity as a process of reciprocal messages. Rafaeli's idea of interactivity can be understood as a process of exchanging messages between two parties in a reciprocal manner. This process should focus on connecting the current message with the preceding ones, instead of emphasizing the specific features of the message or how consumers perceive interactivity. From a process-oriented point of view, the most important aspect of interactivity is the relationship between the messages being exchanged. Song and Zinkhan (2008), did a study on advertising and based it on the aforementioned theory. They showed that interactivity, through personalized messages between brands and consumers directly and strongly affected the attitudes, of the consumer, towards the brand. Interactivity dimensions, such as social presence and empowerment, are integral components, fostering two-way conversations and influencing user perceptions (Dholakia *et al.*, 2000).

Bezjian-Avery, Calder and Iacobucci (1998), described interactivity as repetitively meeting and satisfying the needs and wants of consumers. This study uses interactivity to describe the communication and interaction between the TikTok influencer and consumer. This is done when influencers post videos about a product and a consumer views it. In this study, the researchers assume that interactivity forms part of the factors that impact one's attitude and beliefs towards a consumer. Specifically, that trust is enhanced through interactivity (Chung and Cho, 2017). Influencers are the communication line between the brand and its consumers. They will have to engage in interactivity. Ki and Kim (2019) showed that interactivity enhances positive views and behaviours towards the influencer and consequently the brand.

4.2. The Source Credibility Theory

The Source Credibility Theory, articulated by Hovland and Weiss (1951), forms a crucial lens through which the influence of TikTok influencers is examined. Trustworthiness, competence, and attractiveness emerge as pivotal facets of source credibility. Trustworthiness involves perceptions of honesty, reliability, and integrity, contributing to the acceptance of the message (Bogoevska-Gavrilova and Ciunova-Shuleska, 2022). Competence or expertise is linked to the endorser's knowledge and reliability as an information source. Attractiveness, beyond physical traits, includes personality and skill, influencing the overall credibility of the source. Notably, credible endorsers, possessing product knowledge, enhance persuasiveness, emphasizing the importance of authenticity in endorsement advertising.

4.3. Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model

The SOR Model by Mehrabian and Russel (1974) provides a comprehensive framework to understand consumer decision-making processes. Stimuli, including environmental cues like ambience and visual appeal, influence cognitive and emotional functions (Organism), resulting in behavioural responses (Ligaraba *et al.*, 2023).

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Internal states mediate between stimuli and behavioural reactions, leading to approach or avoidance behaviours. The literature underscores the significance of influencer-specific factors on TikTok, including expertise, popularity, and interactivity. Interactivity emerges as a priority for TikTok influencers, employing various techniques to engage followers actively (Niasse *et al.*, 2022).

5. Hypotheses Development

Interactivity: The ability of a system or technology to respond to user inputs in a way that allows for two-way communication and feedback. It is a key characteristic of many modern digital technologies such as social media platforms. According to the Interaction Design Foundation (2019), interactivity involves "a dialogue between a user and a system, whether that's a website, a mobile app, or any other form of digital product." This dialogue can take many forms, such as clicking buttons, commenting, linking, filling out forms, or manipulating virtual objects on a screen. The system responds to the user's inputs, providing feedback and facilitating further interactions. Another definition of interactivity comes from media scholar Turkle (2016), who describes it as "a psychological state of being in which there is a mutual give-and-take between two entities". In this view, interactivity is not just about the technical features of a system, but also about the social and psychological dynamics between users and technology.

6. Influencer interactivity and brand credibility

Influencers play a crucial role in promoting products (Kim and Yoon, 2023), and building brand credibility. The level of interactivity between influencers and their audience can significantly impact the success of a brand's marketing efforts. Brands should carefully select influencers who can authentically connect with their target audience and actively engage in meaningful conversations. Empirical studies provide support to the assumption that interactivity could be one of the factors that influence credibility (Xiao *et al.*, 2018; Metzger and Flanagin, 2013; Kim *et al.*, 2012). The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

6.1. H1: There is a positive relationship between influencer interactivity and brand credibility.

Credibility: The degree to which a source or message is perceived as trustworthy and reliable. It is important for communication as people are more likely to accept and act on information that they perceive as credible (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Similarly, studies have shown that people are more likely to trust sources that are perceived as unbiased (Metzger *et al.*, 2003). Credibility is a vital in marketing and advertising, where it can influence consumers' attitudes and behaviours toward products and brands. In particular, research has shown that celebrity endorsements can be effective in enhancing product credibility and influencing consumer behaviour, as celebrities are seen as credible sources of information and recommendations (Erdogan, 1999).

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Brand credibility and customer brand engagement

Meaningful engagement contributes to brand loyalty and can further enhance the brand's overall credibility in the eyes of its audience. Within influencer marketing, Liu (2021), advocated that both brand credibility and brand content enjoyment would ultimately cultivate brand engagement. Through the connection and interaction with influencers, consumers may have a closer bonding towards the brand and realize the followers' engagement (Liu, 2021). Brands with a good reputation and high brand equity are more likely to induce positive customer engagement (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012). Considering this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

6.2. H2: There is a positive relationship between brand credibility and customer brand engagement.

Customer brand engagement: Brand engagement refers to the emotional connection and level of interaction that customers have with a brand. It is a measure of the brand's ability to create a meaningful relationship with its customers through various marketing and branding efforts. It describes a consumer's willingness to expend energy, attention, and time in activities that involve the brand (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). This could be in the form of purchasing or communicating with the brand on social media platforms (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014).

Outcomes of Customer brand engagement

Customer brand engagement and brand image

Positive and meaningful engagement with the audience contributes to a favorable brand image (Payne *et al.*, 2009), while a positive brand image, in turn, facilitates deeper and more meaningful engagement with the target audience (Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

6.3. H3: There is a positive relationship between customer brand engagement and brand image

Purchase intention: Purchase intention is the likelihood or willingness for a consumer to purchase a particular product or service in the future. Intentions are considered a strong determinant of behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977). It is an important concept in marketing as it reflects the level of interest and potential demand for a product or service among the target market (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).

Customer brand engagement and purchase intention

Brand engagement creates a pathway for consumers to develop a connection with a brand, influencing their perceptions and shaping their intentions to make a purchase (Yu and Zheng, 2022). Customer engagement has been found to influence customer purchase intention in social commerce (Prentice *et al.*, 2019). Customer engagement has been found to have a positive impact on customer

purchase intention (Jashari-Mani and Zeqiri, 2023), the consumer's positive perceptions about a brand are enhanced by the recommendations of a social marketing influencer, which consequently impacts the purchase intention (Tanwar *et al.*, 2023). By fostering positive and meaningful interactions, brands can increase the likelihood that engaged consumers will convert into loyal customers. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

6.4. H4: There is a positive relationship between customer brand engagement and purchase intention

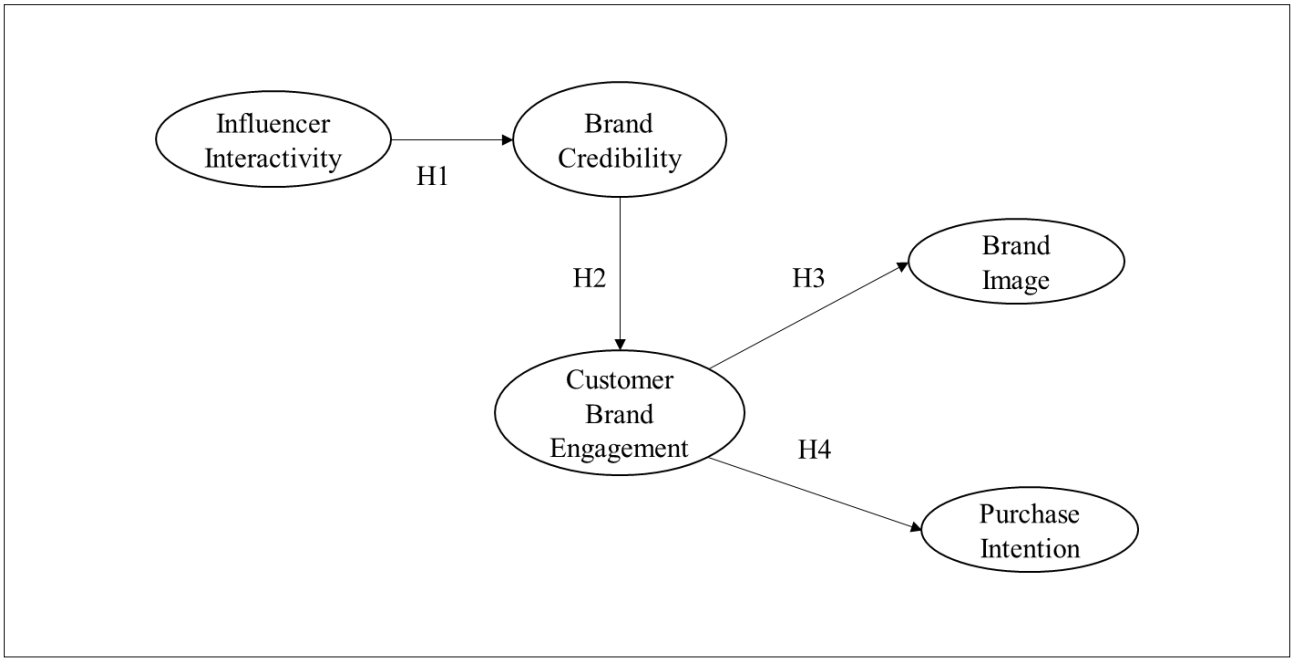
The mediating role of customer brand engagement

H1 states that Influencer Interactivity directly influences brand credibility. H2 states that BC directly affects Customer brand engagement. Therefore, it is reasonable to predict that Customer brand engagement mediates the brand credibility-brand image relationship. And also, that customer brand engagement mediates the brand credibility-purchase intention relationship. Customer engagement refers to a kind of emotional connection between customers and brands (Moliner *et al.*, 2018). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H5: Customer brand engagement mediates the relationship between credibility and brand image.
- H6: Customer brand engagement mediates the relationship between credibility and purchase intention.

Based on the above discussion, Figure 1 summarises our research model.

Figure 1. The research model.



Source: Authors' own construction (2023)

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The relationship among variables in this study and the corresponding hypotheses is summarised in Figure 1.

7. Research Methods and Measures

7.1. Data collection

A quantitative survey was conducted to obtain data. Cross-sectional data was collected from 233 young adults who have TikTok accounts and are following the TikTok accounts of fashion influencers.

7.2. Sample and measures

Convenience sampling technique was chosen in this study to determine the sample, which refers to research. Only those aged between 18 and 35 years who had a TikTok account and are following TikTok accounts of fashion influencers where included. This research used a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire as a measuring tool for all variables. The scale ranges from 1, which means strongly disagree, to 5 means strongly agree. The online questionnaire was designed using Google form.

The measure of influencer interactivity was adapted from (Jin *et al.*, 2021), brand credibility (Hovland and Weiss, 1951), brand image (Keller, 2008), customer brand engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie, 2014), and purchase intention (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items

Constructs	Items	Contents of item	Reference
Influencer Interactivity	II1 II2 II3 II4 II5	A TikTok fashion influencers interactivity is determined by engagement through the use of comments. A TikTok fashion influencer is deemed to be interactive with their viewers through directly talking to their viewership (via their videos). A TikTok fashion influencer is deemed interactive through creating challenges, campaigns and polls that engage with their viewers. Interactive TikTok videos from fashion influencers make a viewer feel included. Interactive TikTok fashion videos create positive attitudes form viewers.	Jin *et al.* (2021)
Brand Credibility	BC1 BC2 BC3	A TikTok fashion influencer's credibility is decreased when they are seen as less relatable. A popular TikTok fashion influencer is seen as more credible than an unpopular one. A TikTok fashion influencer that is an expert in their field is looked as more credible than an inexperienced one.	Hovland and Weiss (1951)

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Constructs	Items	Contents of item	Reference
Customer Brand Engagement	CBE1 CBE2 CBE3	Trust in an TikTok fashion influencer encourages consumers to engage with that influencer and the brand they recommend. A credible TikTok fashion influencer will encourage engagement towards the influencer and the brands they represent (in the form of following, likes and comments) from a consumer. One is more likely to engage with a fashion brand they feel satisfied with.	Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014)
Brand Image	BI1 BI2 BI3	Trust in a fashion TikTok fashion influencer creates a positive brand image for the brand they endorse. A credible fashion TikTok fashion influencer reflects a positive brand image of the brand they endorse. When a consumer is satisfied (through influencer TikTok fashion content) with a brand, they view the brand in a positive light.	Keller (2008)
Consumer Purchase Intention	CPI1 CPI2 CPI3	Trust in a fashion TikTok fashion influencer will encourage a consumer to buy the products they recommend. A credible fashion TikTok fashion influencer is able to motivate a consumer to purchase products or make purchases from specific brands they endorse. A consumer that is satisfied with the brand content provided by a fashion TikTok fashion influencer is more likely to purchase items endorsed by that influencer.	Ajzen and Fishbein (1980)

8. Data analyses

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used in the data analysis. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is more effective at testing large models and is superior for prediction-oriented model testing compared to covariance-based SEM (Troiville *et al.*, 2019).

9. Results

9.1. Descriptive statistics

Data in Table 2 shows that there were 233 respondents. 51.5% of the participants were female, with 25.3% male and 23.2% not disclosing their gender. The majority of respondents were aged 18-23, with 39.1% in the 24-28 age group and 21.5% in the 29-35 age range. Annual household income was diverse, with 24.5% not disclosing income and 16.7% exceeding R750,000. TikTok usage patterns showed that 42.1% use it multiple times a day, 39.1% daily, 12.9% weekly, and 6% infrequently.

Table 2. Demographics of the sample

Item	Category	Sample	Percentage %
Gender	Male	59	25.3
	Female	120	51.5
	Prefer not to say	54	23.2

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Item	Category	Sample	Percentage %
Age	18-23 years old	92	39.5
	24-28 years old	91	39.1
	29-35 years old	50	21.5
Annual Household Income	Below R200 000	50	21.5
	R200 001-R500 000	46	19.7
	R500 001-R750 000	41	17.6
	Above R750 001	39	16.7
	Prefer not to answer	57	24.5
How often do you use TikTok?	Barely	14	6
	Weekly	30	12.9
	Daily	91	39.1
	Multiple times a day	98	42.1

Source: Authors' own calculation using SEM Smart PLS

9.2. Measurement Model

The measurement model tested constructs' reliability and validity and the results are discussed below:

9.3. Testing for Reliability

Table 3 Factor Loadings

	Outer loadings
BE1 <- Customer Brand Engagement	0,743
BE2 <- Customer Brand Engagement	0,819
BE3 <- Customer Brand Engagement	0,759
BI1 <- Brand Image	0,824
BI2 <- Brand Image	0,842
BI3 <- Brand Image	0,841
CPI1 <- Purchase intention	0,741
CPI2 <- Purchase intention	0,804
CPI3 <- Purchase intention	0,786

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	Outer loadings
II1 <- Influencer Interactivity	0,604
II2 <- Influencer Interactivity	0,638
II3 <- Influencer Interactivity	0,768
II4 <- Influencer Interactivity	0,710
II5 <- Influencer Interactivity	0,765
PBC1 <- Brand Credibility	0,762
PBC2 <- Brand Credibility	0,747
PBC3 <- Brand Credibility	0,792

Source: Authors' own calculation using SEM Smart PLS

Table 3 shows all indicators for variables with loading factors more than 0.70, indicating a high standard of validity.

Table 4 Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) - Matrix

	Brand Credibility	Customer Brand Engagement	Brand Image	Influencer Interactivity	Purchase intention
Brand Credibility					
Customer Brand Engagement	0,706				
Brand Image	0,470	0,749			
Influencer Interactivity	0,646	0,575	0,435		
Purchase intention	0,565	0,872	0,666	0,568	

Furthermore, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (Table 4) and the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Table 5) were examined during the discriminant validity testing for this study.

Table 5 Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Brand Credibility	Brand Engagement	Brand Image	Influencer Interactivity	Purchase intention
Brand Credibility	0,767				
Customer Brand Engagement	0,467	0,774			
Brand Image	0,342	0,545	0,836		
Influencer Interactivity	0,456	0,407	0,335	0,700	
Purchase intention	0,379	0,585	0,485	0,397	0,777

Source: Authors' own calculation using SEM Smart PLS

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Table 5 below depicts the validity test used in this study based on the Fornell-Larcker Criterion. The correlations between the variables and the square root of the AVE are shown by the values listed in the table's diagonal.

Table 6 Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Credibility	0,650	0,811	0,588
Customer Brand Engagement	0,665	0,818	0,600
Brand Image	0,785	0,874	0,698
Influencer Interactivity	0,740	0,827	0,490
Purchase intention	0,672	0,821	0,604

Source: Authors' own calculation using SEM Smart PLS

The reliability of the construct in this study was evaluated using composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha (CA), and AVE. The variable is deemed reliable if the CR and CA are greater than 0.7 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) and AVE is greater than 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The result in Table 6 indicates that each indicator has a value over the suggested minimum. Thus, it can be said that all of the study's construct have high reliability.

10. Structural model and hypotheses results

Table 7 Hypotheses testing results.

		Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values	Results
H1	Influencer Interactivity -> Brand Credibility	0,456	0,462	0,075	6,042	0,000	Significant
H2	Brand Credibility -> Customer Brand Engagement	0,467	0,465	0,073	6,370	0,000	Significant
H3	Brand Engagement -> Brand Image	0,545	0,544	0,067	8,161	0,000	Significant
H4	Customer Brand Engagement -> Purchase intention	0,585	0,583	0,074	7,908	0,000	Significant

Note(s): *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Source: Authors' own calculation using SEM Smart PLS

The result in Table 7 confirms all of the study's hypotheses. Regarding the first Hypothesis (H1), the findings demonstrate that influencer interactivity positively and significantly impacts brand credibility (β= 0,456; p < 0.001). results concerning the second Hypothesis (H2) also show that brand credibility has

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a positive and significant impact on customer brand engagement (β= 0.467; p < 0.001). The third Hypothesis(H3)test results demonstrate that customer brand engagement has a positive and significant impact on brand image (β= 0,545, p < 0.001).

11. Mediation analysis

Mediation analysis was performed with the help of the bootstrapping bias-corrected method with a 95% confidence interval and 5,000 samples. This method allows accurate estimates to be obtained for the non-normally distributed data (Enders, 2005) and for a structural model including mediation effects (Cheung and Lau, 2008).

Table 8 Mediating Analysis Results

Bootstrap bias-corrected method 95%							
Specific indirect effect: Mediation relationships	β	Standard deviation (STDEV)	t-value	lower	upper	p-value	Significant
Brand Credibility -> Customer Brand Engagement -> Brand Image	0,255	0,065	3,888	0,143	0,393	0,000	Yes
Brand Credibility -> Customer Brand Engagement -> Purchase intention	0,273	0,069	3,956	0,150	0,415	0,000	Yes

Source: Authors' own calculation using SEM Smart PLS

The results, presented in Table 8 show that the mediating effect of customer brand engagement on the brand credibility-brand image relationship (H5) yielded a significant and positive result (β= 0.255; p < 0.001), implying that customer brand engagement is a significant mediator of the brand credibility-brand image relationship. Finally, further evaluation of the mediating effect of customer brand engagement on the brand credibility-purchase intention relationship (H6) yielded a significant and positive result (β= 0.273; p < 0.001), implying that customer brand engagement is a significant mediator of the brand credibility-brand image relationship.

The R2 values stand for the percentage of variance explained. The results show that R2 values are substantial for brand credibility (R2 = 0.208), brand engagement (R2 = 0.218), brand image (R2 = 0.297), and purchase intention (R2 = 0.342), indicating that the structural model has accepted level of predictive accuracy.

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12. Discussion, theoretical contributions and managerial implications

12.1. Discussion

The focus of the study is on influencer interactivity, which is a unique feature of influencer marketing and investigated its role on brand credibility, customer brand engagement, brand image and purchase intention. In particular, the mediating role of customer brand engagement was revealed. The results of the hypotheses testing for the proposed model are as follows:

As anticipated, H1 is supported (β=0.456; $p < 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship between influencer interactivity and brand credibility. Therefore, H1 is accepted. This finding is aligned with Liu (2021) who previously confirmed this relationship. H2 is supported (β=0.467; $p < 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship between brand credibility and customer brand engagement. Hence, H2 is accepted. This finding is aligned with (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012). H3 is supported (β=0.545; $p < 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship between customer brand engagement and brand image. Therefore, H3 is accepted. This finding is aligned with (Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2016). H4 is supported (β=0.585; $p < 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship between customer brand engagement and purchase intention. Therefore, H4 is accepted. H5 yielded a significant and positive result (β= 0.255, $p < 0.001$), implying that customer brand engagement is a significant mediator of the brand credibility-brand image relationship. Therefore, H5 is supported. H6 yielded a significant and positive result (β= 0.273, $p < 0.001$), implying that customer brand engagement is a significant mediator of the brand credibility-brand image relationship. Hence, H6 is supported.

12.2. Theoretical contribution

The findings of the study were significant and aligned with established psychological and communication theories, enhancing the understanding of the impact of fashion TikTok influencers on brand image and consumer behaviour amongst young consumers. Drawing from the SOR model by Mehrabian and Russel (1974), the research identified the relationships between influencer interactivity, brand credibility, customer brand engagement, brand image, and purchase intention, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics. Furthermore, the application of the source credibility theory by Hovland and Weiss (1951) highlighted the role of credibility in shaping consumer behaviour. Finally, the incorporation of the interactivity theory introduced by Rafaeli (1988) and later Song and Zinkhan, (2008) emphasised the importance of engagement and communication between influencers and their followers in building image and behavioural intention. By understanding the mediating effect of customer brand engagement and influencer interactivity, as well as the effect these have on young adults' purchase intention and brand image perception, the research therefore contributed to a better understanding of the ways in which customer brand engagement, and influencer interactivity influence consumers buying intention and brand image perception. This research not only contributed to theory but also provided practical insights for marketing strategies aimed at engaging the younger generation through TikTok fashion influencers in South Africa.

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13. Managerial implications

The study provides valuable insights for marketers in South Africa, particularly targeting young consumers. It investigates the relationships between influencer interactivity, brand outcomes and behavioural outcomes. The study emphasises the importance of TikTok fashion influencer interactivity. With 54% of consumers making purchases based on influencer content and 78% expressing trust in influencer recommendations, the research highlights the potential impact of well-informed influencer partnerships. The study also offers practical guidance on influencer selection, advocating for influencer interactivity. The unique feature of influencer interactivity lies in its ability to establish a direct and personal connection between influencers and their followers.

This guidance equips brands to make informed decisions in structuring campaigns, maximizing the impact of TikTok fashion influencers. The research highlights the significance of brand credibility, customer engagement, brand image, and purchase intention, providing a foundation for comprehensive marketing strategies. The managerial implications empower marketers to navigate the evolving landscape of influencer marketing in South Africa.

14. Conclusion

The research offers tangible evidence supporting the impact of TikTok influencers on the perception of brand image and the purchase intentions of young consumers in the fashion industry. All the hypotheses were validated, showing strong positive associations between various aspects of consumer perception and behaviour, such as influencer interactivity, brand credibility, customer brand engagement, brand image, and consumer purchasing intentions. Moreover, the study established that the model is capable of effectively predicting the influence of TikTok fashion influencers interactivity on the purchasing decisions of young adults in South Africa. As a result, this research provided a substantial contribution to the body of knowledge on TikTok influencer interactivity and their role in the fashion industry.

15. Limitations and future research directions

The study has several limitations. To improve the understanding, future research should conduct research in different geographical contexts, and include older consumer groups beyond the 18 – 35 year age range. Factors such as gender, socio-economic status, and cultural backgrounds should also be considered. Qualitative research should be combined with quantitative data to provide in-depth insights. Longitudinal studies should track changes in influencers' impact over time. Language barriers should be addressed to ensure inclusivity of participants and accuracy. Future research should explore specific fashion brands, influencer categories, and product-related activities. Comparing the effects of influencers in different industries can provide insights into the broader implications of social media marketing on consumer behaviour.

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- Conception and design of the work: N.G.; A.M.; H.M.
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- Data collection: N.G.; A.M.; H.M.
- Data analysis and critical interpretation of data: N.G.; A.M.; H.M.
- Revision and approval of versions: N.G.; A.M.; H.M.

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