

How TikTok Food Influencers Shape Young Consumers' Purchase Intentions: The Mediating Roles of Credibility and Parasocial Interaction

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Abstract

Social media influencers have become increasingly important in digital marketing through interactive and personalised content. This study investigates how TikTok food influencers' attributes influence young consumers' purchase intentions through the mediating roles of credibility and parasocial interaction (PSI). Drawing upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and PSI theory, this research examines how physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily function as persuasive cues that shape consumers' credibility-based evaluations and perceived interpersonal involvement with influencers. Data were collected from 403 young consumers in China with experience engaging with TikTok food influencer content and analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal two distinct but complementary mechanisms: credibility-based evaluation and parasocial interaction. Physical attractiveness is primarily associated with credibility, social attractiveness with PSI, while attitude homophily contributes to both, with a stronger association with PSI. PSI also demonstrates a stronger influence on purchase intention than credibility, highlighting the importance of perceived interpersonal involvement in short-form influencer marketing. This study extends influencer marketing research by showing how different influencer-related cues operate through credibility and PSI within TikTok's interactive media environment and provides practical implications for effective influencer marketing strategies.

Keywords: TikTok, food influencer, parasocial interaction, credibility, purchase intention, Elaboration Likelihood Model

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have transformed marketing communication by shifting brand–consumer interactions from one-way promotional exchanges toward interactive and relationship-oriented engagement. Within this environment, influencer marketing has become an important digital marketing strategy, combining content creation and audience engagement to shape consumer attitudes and purchase-related decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Han & Balabanis, 2024; Ooi et al., 2023).

The rise of short-form video platforms such as TikTok has further transformed influencer marketing by integrating commercial communication with entertainment, social interaction, and personalised content engagement. In China, short-video applications reached approximately 1.04 billion users by the end of 2024, accounting for 93.8% of Internet users (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2025). Beyond entertainment, TikTok has developed into a social commerce ecosystem where consumers encounter product-related information through short videos and influencer-generated content, with food and beverage products ranking among the major product categories on its e-commerce platform (United States Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service [USDA FAS], 2025). The interactive nature of TikTok provides a relevant context in which influencer persuasion may involve not only evaluations of influencer credibility but also relational connections between influencers and audiences (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024; Flecha-Ortiz et al., 2023).

Previous research has identified source credibility and influencer characteristics such as authenticity, attractiveness, and perceived similarity as important factors shaping consumer responses to influencer-generated content (Ohanian, 1990; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Audrezet et al., 2020). Existing studies have mainly focused on Instagram and YouTube, particularly in beauty, fashion, and lifestyle sectors (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Casaló et al., 2020), while food influencer

marketing on short-form video platforms such as TikTok remains comparatively underexplored. TikTok food influencer marketing provides a particularly relevant context because it combines visually oriented food and product presentations with influencers' personal consumption experiences, recommendations, and interactive audience engagement. Consumers therefore engage with both food-related content and the influencers presenting it, making both influencer evaluation and relational engagement particularly relevant to understanding consumer responses in this context (Bahri & Dwita, 2025; Syarif et al., 2025). Therefore, further research is needed to understand how influencer attributes operate within TikTok food marketing contexts and through which psychological mechanisms they influence consumer responses.

Beyond this contextual limitation, existing research has often examined influencer attributes as general predictors of consumer responses, providing limited understanding of whether different attributes operate through distinct psychological mechanisms (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Kitchen et al., 2014). For example, physical attractiveness may influence consumers' evaluations of influencer credibility, whereas interpersonal similarity and social connection may contribute more strongly to relational engagement.

Previous research has primarily emphasised credibility in explaining influencer effectiveness, while social media audiences may also develop perceived closeness and familiarity with influencers through repeated exposure and interaction (Lou & Yuan, 2019). PSI is particularly relevant in the TikTok context, as recent research has shown that short-form influencer content on TikTok can enhance users' PSI with influencers and subsequently influence purchase intention (Snyder et al., 2026). Parasocial interaction (PSI) describes audiences' perceived interaction with media figures during mediated exposure, providing a complementary perspective for understanding such interpersonal involvement (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985). Integrating PSI with credibility therefore enables a more comprehensive explanation of influencer persuasion by considering both credibility-based evaluation and perceived interpersonal involvement.

Building on these theoretical and empirical gaps, this study integrates the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and parasocial interaction theory to examine how TikTok food influencers influence young consumers' purchase intentions. ELM distinguishes between the central route, which involves more effortful evaluation of message information, and the peripheral route, in which persuasion is influenced by cues surrounding the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Rather than examining both routes, this study focuses specifically on the peripheral route by examining physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily as distinct influencer-related peripheral cues in TikTok food marketing. It investigates how these cues influence purchase intentions through credibility and parasocial interaction as distinct mediating mechanisms.

Using survey data from young consumers in China analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), this study contributes to understanding how different influencer-related cues operate through credibility-based evaluation and perceived interpersonal involvement in TikTok food marketing. The findings also provide practical implications for influencers and marketers developing effective communication strategies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986) provides a comprehensive framework for explaining how persuasive communication influences individuals' attitudes and behavioural responses. The model suggests that persuasion occurs through two distinct information-processing routes: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves systematic evaluation of message arguments when individuals possess sufficient motivation and cognitive ability to process information, leading to relatively enduring attitude changes. In contrast, the peripheral route occurs when individuals have limited motivation, ability, or opportunity to elaborate on persuasive messages, causing individuals to rely on heuristic cues associated with the communicator, message context, or other external characteristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 1981).

In social media environments, limited attention and high volumes of commercial information may lead consumers to rely on simplified cues rather than extensively evaluating every promotional message (Chaiken, 1979). These peripheral cues include communicator-related characteristics such as attractiveness, credibility, expertise, and similarity, which can shape responses to persuasive messages (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Bhattacharjee & Sanford, 2006). This mechanism is particularly relevant to influencer marketing, where promotional content is often personalised and visually oriented. Accordingly, this study draws on ELM to explain how influencer-related characteristics function as communicator-related peripheral cues in social media persuasion.

Influencer marketing further illustrates the relevance of such peripheral cues, as commercial messages are often embedded within influencers' personal content and interactions with followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Characteristics such as credibility, expertise, authenticity, attractiveness, and perceived similarity can shape consumers' trust and responses to influencer-generated content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Audrezet et al., 2020). However,

existing research has largely examined influencer marketing on Instagram and YouTube, particularly in beauty, fashion, and lifestyle sectors (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Casalo et al., 2020), leaving persuasion mechanisms in short-form video commerce comparatively underexplored.

In the context of TikTok food influencer marketing, ELM provides a useful theoretical basis for explaining how influencer-related characteristics may function as persuasive cues within a fast-paced and visually oriented environment. In the present study, influencer attributes are conceptualised as communicator-related peripheral cues that may shape consumers' responses, including their perceptions of influencer credibility. Importantly, credibility is not conceptualised as the central route of ELM; rather, it represents a consumer assessment that may be influenced by peripheral source cues. ELM is therefore used specifically to explain the persuasive role of influencer-related cues, rather than to characterise credibility and PSI as central and peripheral processing routes. However, ELM alone does not fully account for audiences' perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers. PSI theory therefore provides a complementary perspective for explaining this aspect of influencer persuasion.

2.2 Source Credibility

Among these persuasive mechanisms, credibility is particularly relevant because it reflects consumers' assessment of whether an influencer is a reliable and credible information source. Within the source credibility literature, credibility is traditionally conceptualised in terms of perceptions such as trustworthiness and expertise, which influence whether audiences perceive a source as reliable and persuasive (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). In digital marketing environments, credibility becomes particularly important because consumers increasingly depend on influencers for product-related information and consumption guidance. Influencers perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable are more likely to reduce consumer uncertainty, strengthen confidence in recommendations, and generate favourable behavioural outcomes (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Furthermore, credibility formation in influencer marketing extends beyond information quality and expertise, as audiences also evaluate influencers through authenticity, self-presentation, and perceived relational connections. Influencers who demonstrate personal experiences, transparency, and meaningful engagement with followers may enhance perceptions of trustworthiness and credibility (Chung & Cho, 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017). Recent research further suggests that influencer characteristics, including attractiveness and perceived similarity, contribute to credibility evaluations by shaping consumers' perceptions of the communicator (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Masuda et al., 2022). Therefore, perceived credibility provides an important mechanism through which influencer-related cues may shape subsequent consumer responses.

2.3 Parasocial Interaction in Influencer Marketing

Parasocial interaction (PSI) was originally introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe audiences' perceived interaction with media figures during mediated exposure despite the absence of reciprocal interpersonal communication. Importantly, PSI should be distinguished from parasocial relationship (PSR). PSI refers to the perceived interaction and psychological involvement experienced during mediated encounters, whereas PSR refers to a more enduring relational bond with a media figure that may develop across repeated exposure (Dibble et al., 2016). Although these concepts are closely related and have sometimes been used interchangeably in previous research, the present study focuses specifically on PSI as audiences' perceived interpersonal involvement with TikTok food influencers.

Although PSI was initially examined in traditional mass media contexts, its application has expanded to interactive digital platforms. Repeated exposure, perceived similarity, and personalised communication can contribute to audiences' feelings of closeness and psychological involvement with media personalities (Rubin et al., 1985; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Social media influencers further facilitate such involvement by sharing personal experiences and maintaining continuous interaction through comments, livestreaming, and other engagement features (Labrecque, 2014; Lee & Watkins, 2016). These characteristics can enhance perceived accessibility, authenticity, and relational closeness, making PSI increasingly relevant to contemporary social media marketing (Dibble et al., 2016).

Within influencer marketing, PSI may shape consumer responses by making recommendations appear more personal and socially meaningful (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Research further indicates that stronger parasocial involvement is associated with followers' trust, engagement, and acceptance of influencer recommendations (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In social commerce, such relational involvement may become particularly relevant because influencer communication combines content, interaction, consumer engagement, and commercial activities (Liu, 2023).

PSI is particularly relevant to short-form platforms such as TikTok, where algorithmic recommendation, repeated exposure, personal storytelling, and interactive features may facilitate perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers. TikTok influencers often present everyday experiences and product recommendations informally, which may strengthen familiarity and emotional connection. This is especially relevant to food influencer

marketing, where content frequently incorporates personal preferences and consumption experiences that can enhance receptiveness to influencer recommendations (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Vazquez et al., 2020). PSI therefore helps explain influencer effectiveness within interactive social commerce environments.

Although credibility captures consumers' assessments of influencers as information sources, it does not fully explain perceived interaction and psychological involvement in interactive social media environments. PSI therefore provides a complementary mechanism for explaining this interpersonal dimension of influencer persuasion. Examining credibility and PSI together enables this study to assess how influencer attributes shape purchase intention through two distinct but complementary mechanisms.

3. Research Model Development

Building on ELM and PSI theory, this study examines how TikTok food influencers shape young consumers' purchase intentions by conceptualising influencer attributes as peripheral persuasive cues operating through two complementary mediating mechanisms: credibility and parasocial interaction.

The selection of the focal constructs was informed by established research on social media influencer persuasion, particularly Sokolova and Kefi (2020), which examined physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, attitude homophily, credibility, and parasocial interaction in relation to purchase intention. Physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily were selected because they represent conceptually distinct perceptions of influencers, including physical appeal, interpersonal appeal, and perceived similarity in attitudes and values. Examining these attributes together allows the study to investigate whether different influencer-related cues operate through credibility and PSI as complementary mediating mechanisms that capture source evaluation and perceived interpersonal involvement, respectively.

Source credibility research suggests that communicator characteristics can influence perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990), while influencer credibility can reduce uncertainty and enhance acceptance of product-related information (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Accordingly, this study conceptualises credibility as an overall evaluation of the influencer as an information source rather than treating trustworthiness and expertise as separate structural outcomes.

Physical attractiveness is considered an important peripheral cue that may influence credibility evaluations. Attractive communicators are generally perceived as more favourable, competent, and trustworthy due to the positive influence of physical appearance on source evaluations (Reis et al., 1980; Ohanian, 1990). Previous studies in influencer marketing have demonstrated that perceived attractiveness enhances followers' credibility perceptions toward social media influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Physical attractiveness is positively related to credibility.

Attitude homophily refers to the perceived similarity between influencers and followers in terms of values, interests, and lifestyles. Such similarity can reduce psychological distance and facilitate trust, leading followers to perceive influencers as more credible sources of information (Giles, 2002; Lee & Watkins, 2016). In social media influencer contexts, followers are more likely to accept recommendations from influencers who share similar beliefs and personal characteristics because perceived similarity strengthens relational trust and source evaluations (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Masuda et al., 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Attitude homophily (AH) is positively related to credibility (CR).

Physical attractiveness may facilitate parasocial interaction because visually appealing influencers can generate positive impressions and interpersonal attraction (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). In social media contexts, repeated exposure to attractive influencers may further increase perceived familiarity and psychological involvement during mediated encounters (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Chung & Cho, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Physical attractiveness is positively related to parasocial interaction.

Social attractiveness reflects followers' perceptions of influencers as likeable, friendly, and socially desirable. Unlike physical attractiveness, it emphasises interpersonal qualities that may facilitate social connection and reduce psychological distance (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). In social media contexts, such interpersonal appeal may strengthen perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky, 2010; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Social attractiveness is positively related to parasocial interaction.

Attitude homophily refers to the perceived similarity between influencers and followers in terms of values, interests, and lifestyles. Such perceived similarity may reduce psychological distance and facilitate interpersonal connection, as individuals tend to feel greater affinity towards others who share similar characteristics (McPherson et al., 2001). In social

media contexts, followers may experience greater familiarity and perceived closeness towards influencers whom they perceive as similar to themselves, thereby strengthening their perceived interaction and psychological involvement with these influencers (Giles, 2002; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Attitude homophily is positively related to parasocial interaction.

Credibility reflects consumers' overall assessment of an influencer as a credible information source, informed by perceptions such as trustworthiness, expertise, and reliability. According to source credibility theory, credible sources are more persuasive because audiences are more likely to accept information from sources they perceive as trustworthy and knowledgeable (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). In influencer marketing contexts, perceived credibility can reduce consumers' uncertainty and increase confidence in product recommendations, thereby increasing their willingness to purchase recommended products (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Credibility is positively related to purchase intention.

Parasocial interaction reflects audiences' perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers during mediated encounters. Such involvement may increase consumers' receptiveness to influencer recommendations and strengthen behavioural intentions. Such perceived closeness can strengthen followers' attachment and increase their willingness to respond favourably to influencer recommendations (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985). In social media influencer contexts, previous research has demonstrated that parasocial interaction positively influences consumers' purchase intentions by enhancing emotional involvement and trust toward influencers (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Parasocial interaction is positively related to purchase intention.

Building on the preceding direct relationships, this study examines whether credibility and PSI mediate the effects of influencer attributes on purchase intention through distinct but complementary processes. Accordingly, the following mediation hypotheses are proposed:

H8: Credibility mediates the relationship between physical attractiveness and purchase intention.

H9: Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between physical attractiveness and purchase intention.

H10: Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between social attractiveness and purchase intention.

H11: Credibility mediates the relationship between attitude homophily and purchase intention.

H12: Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between attitude homophily and purchase intention.

Accordingly, the proposed model comprises seven direct-effect and five mediation hypotheses, as illustrated in Figure 1. Together, these hypotheses examine how TikTok food influencer attributes shape purchase intention through the distinct but complementary mechanisms of credibility and parasocial interaction.

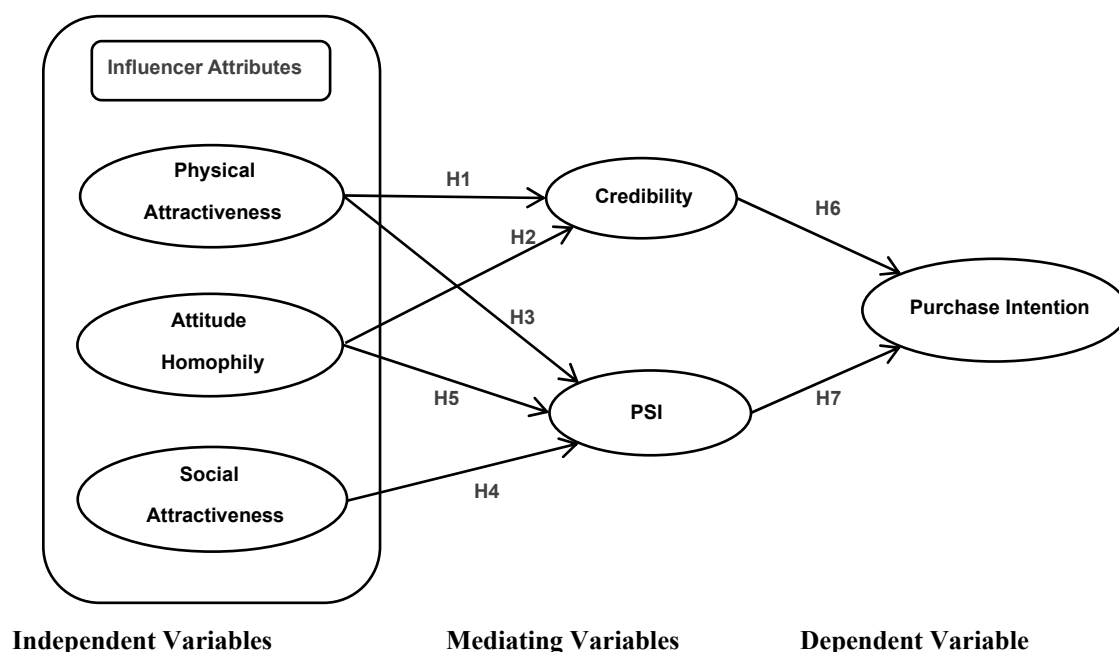


Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

4. Methodology

4.1 Questionnaire Development and Data Collection

To operationalize the constructs, all measurement items used in this study were adapted from established scales in previous literature. Physical attractiveness and social attractiveness were measured based on Ohanian's (1990) source attractiveness scale. Attitude homophily was adapted from Rubin et al. (1985) and Lou and Kim (2019), while credibility was measured using source credibility scales developed by Ohanian (1990) and further contextualized in influencer marketing research by Lou and Yuan (2019). Parasocial interaction was adapted from Lee and Watkins (2016), and purchase intention items were adopted from See-To and Ho (2014) and Lee and Watkins (2016). All measurement items were adjusted to fit the TikTok food influencer context while maintaining their original theoretical meanings.

All constructs were measured reflectively using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire consisted of 45 measurement items representing six constructs, namely physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, attitude homophily, credibility, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention. In addition, demographic characteristics and TikTok usage-related information were collected to describe respondents' profiles. To ensure accurate understanding among Chinese respondents, the questionnaire was prepared in both English and Chinese, with careful translation and review procedures applied to maintain consistency between the two versions.

Data were collected through an online survey administered via Wenjuanxing in China. Respondents were recruited through online social networks, particularly WeChat, using purposive sampling based on predefined eligibility criteria. Screening questions confirmed respondents' age, residence in Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, purchase of food products on TikTok within the past two months, and exposure to TikTok food influencer content. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Putra Malaysia Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (JKEUPM) prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and eligible respondents who completed the questionnaire were offered entry into a lucky draw as a small token of appreciation. Quota monitoring maintained an approximate balance across the three cities. After removing incomplete responses, 403 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, with the final sample characteristics summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Profile	Category	Percent (%)	Frequency (n)
City	Guangzhou	34.4	139
	Beijing	34.2	138
	Shanghai	31.2	126
Gender	Male	56.8	229
	Female	43.2	174
Highest Level of Education	Bachelor's degree	76.6	309
	High school or below	8.2	33
	Master's degree	9.2	37
	Doctoral degree	6.0	24
Employment Status	Full-time employed	54.3	219
	Self-employed	23.1	93
	Temporary/part-time employed	9.4	38
	Student	7.7	31
	Unemployed	5.5	22
Total			403

4.2 Statistical Procedures

PLS-SEM was employed using SmartPLS 4.0 to analyse the proposed research model because it is suitable for complex models involving multiple latent constructs and mediation relationships without requiring strict multivariate normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2017).

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the measurement model was assessed for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Second, the structural model was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to test the hypothesised direct and indirect effects. Explanatory power, effect sizes, and predictive relevance were evaluated using R^2 , f^2 , and Q^2 , respectively, while indirect effects were examined using bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) bootstrap confidence intervals.

5. Results

This section presents the results of the measurement model, structural model, and mediation analyses conducted to evaluate the proposed research model.

5.1 Measurement Model Assessment

As shown in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.931 to 0.978, composite reliability from 0.944 to 0.982, and AVE from 0.707 to 0.885, all exceeding the recommended thresholds of 0.70 for reliability and 0.50 for AVE.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 3, HTMT values ranged from 0.258 to 0.566, below the recommended threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity Results (AVE = Average Variance Extracted)

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	AVE
Physical Attractiveness (PA)	7	0.938	0.949	0.728
Social Attractiveness (SA)	7	0.931	0.944	0.707
Attitude Homophily (AH)	9	0.949	0.956	0.709
Credibility (CR)	7	0.942	0.952	0.741
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	8	0.958	0.965	0.774
Purchase Intention (PI)	7	0.978	0.982	0.885

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Results

Constructs	PA	SA	AH	CR	PSI	PI
PA	—	0.566	0.380	0.535	0.326	0.273
SA	0.566	—	0.434	0.512	0.361	0.327
AH	0.380	0.434	—	0.388	0.488	0.483
CR	0.535	0.512	0.388	—	0.258	0.379
PSI	0.326	0.361	0.488	0.258	—	0.544
PI	0.273	0.327	0.483	0.379	0.544	—

5.2 Structural Model Assessment

As shown in Table 4, the model explained 29.4%, 25.4%, and 33.7% of the variance in credibility (CR), parasocial interaction (PSI), and purchase intention (PI), respectively. All endogenous constructs demonstrated predictive relevance, with Q^2 values above zero ($CR = 0.216$, $PSI = 0.195$, and $PI = 0.296$).

As shown in Table 5, $PA \rightarrow CR$ ($f^2 = 0.225$) and $AH \rightarrow PSI$ ($f^2 = 0.151$) demonstrated medium effects, while $PSI \rightarrow PI$ showed the largest effect size ($f^2 = 0.307$). The remaining structural paths showed small or negligible effects.

Table 4. Explanatory Power and Predictive Relevance of the Structural Model

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Q^2
CR	0.294	0.216
PSI	0.254	0.195
PI	0.337	0.296

Note. Q^2 values above zero indicate predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 5. Effect Size (f^2) Assessment of the Structural Model

Structural Path	f^2	Effect Size
$PA \rightarrow CR$	0.225	Medium
$PA \rightarrow PSI$	0.010	Negligible
$SA \rightarrow PSI$	0.017	Negligible
$AH \rightarrow CR$	0.053	Small
$AH \rightarrow PSI$	0.151	Medium
$CR \rightarrow PI$	0.089	Small
$PSI \rightarrow PI$	0.307	Medium

Note. f^2 represents effect size, and the thresholds follow Cohen (1988).

5.3 Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesized relationships were tested using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples. Path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values were examined to determine the significance of the proposed relationships. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Path	Hypothesis	β	t-value	p-value	Result
PA $\rightarrow$ CR	H1	0.427	8.153	<0.001	Supported
AH $\rightarrow$ CR	H2	0.215	3.786	<0.001	Supported
PA $\rightarrow$ PSI	H3	0.103	1.486	0.137	Not supported
SA $\rightarrow$ PSI	H4	0.137	2.230	0.026	Supported
AH $\rightarrow$ PSI	H5	0.375	6.732	<0.001	Supported
CR $\rightarrow$ PI	H6	0.251	5.006	<0.001	Supported
PSI $\rightarrow$ PI	H7	0.465	9.589	<0.001	Supported

As shown in Table 6, six of the seven proposed hypotheses were supported. Physical attractiveness significantly predicted credibility, while attitude homophily significantly predicted both credibility and PSI, and social attractiveness significantly predicted PSI. Both credibility and PSI significantly predicted purchase intention, with PSI showing the stronger effect ($\beta = 0.465$ vs. $\beta = 0.251$). In contrast, the relationship between physical attractiveness and PSI was not significant ($\beta = 0.103$, $p = 0.137$).

5.4 Mediation Analysis

The mediating effects of credibility and parasocial interaction were examined using bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. An indirect effect was considered significant when the 95% confidence interval did not include zero. The mediation results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Mediation Analysis Results

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	Indirect Effect (β)	t-value	p-value	95% BCa CI	Result
H8	PA $\rightarrow$ CR $\rightarrow$ PI	0.107	4.538	<0.001	[0.061, 0.154]	Supported
H9	PA $\rightarrow$ PSI $\rightarrow$ PI	0.048	1.491	0.136	[-0.016, 0.112]	Not supported
H10	SA $\rightarrow$ PSI $\rightarrow$ PI	0.064	2.129	0.033	[0.005, 0.123]	Supported
H11	AH $\rightarrow$ CR $\rightarrow$ PI	0.054	2.824	0.005	[0.017, 0.091]	Supported
H12	AH $\rightarrow$ PSI $\rightarrow$ PI	0.174	4.990	<0.001	[0.106, 0.242]	Supported

Note. Mediation effects were assessed using BCa bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples.

As shown in Table 7, four of the five mediation hypotheses were supported. Credibility significantly mediated the effects of physical attractiveness and attitude homophily on purchase intention, while PSI significantly mediated the effects of social attractiveness and attitude homophily. The indirect effect of physical attractiveness through PSI was not significant. Notably, attitude homophily showed the strongest indirect effect through PSI ($\beta = 0.174$).

6. Discussion

This study demonstrates that TikTok food influencer persuasion operates through two distinct but complementary mediating mechanisms: credibility and parasocial interaction (PSI). More importantly, the findings reveal that influencer attributes do not operate uniformly across these mechanisms. Physical attractiveness was primarily associated with credibility, social attractiveness was associated with PSI, while attitude homophily contributed to both credibility and PSI, with a stronger association with PSI. This differentiated pattern suggests that influencer attributes are not functionally equivalent persuasive cues and that their effects on consumer responses depend on the mechanism through which they operate. Accordingly, the contribution of the study lies not only in examining TikTok food influencers in a new context, but also in demonstrating how different influencer attributes work together through distinct mechanisms within the same model.

6.1 Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal a differentiated pattern in how influencer attributes operate across the two mediating mechanisms. Physical attractiveness was primarily associated with credibility, social attractiveness was associated with PSI, while attitude homophily contributed to both credibility and PSI, with a stronger association with PSI. Taken together, these findings indicate that influencer attributes are not functionally equivalent persuasive cues, but operate through distinct yet complementary mechanisms in shaping consumer responses. This differentiated pattern provides a more nuanced understanding of influencer persuasion beyond examining individual relationships in isolation.

An important finding concerns the differentiated effects of physical attractiveness across credibility and PSI. While physical attractiveness significantly enhanced credibility, its effect on parasocial interaction was not supported. This pattern is consistent with previous influencer marketing research suggesting that attractiveness functions as an important communicator-related cue that can shape consumers' credibility evaluations of influencers (Ohanian, 1990; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Importantly, the significant relationship between physical attractiveness and credibility should not be interpreted as evidence that physical attractiveness operates through the central route of ELM. Rather, physical attractiveness remains a peripheral cue whose influence may be reflected in consumers' evaluative judgements of the influencer as an information source. By contrast, the insignificant relationship between physical attractiveness and PSI suggests that visual appeal alone may not be sufficient to generate perceived interaction and psychological involvement. In interactive social media environments such as TikTok, such involvement may depend more strongly on interpersonal cues, including perceived similarity and ongoing interaction, than on appearance alone (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Therefore, the findings suggest that physical attractiveness primarily contributes to credibility-based evaluation, while PSI requires additional interpersonal cues beyond visual appeal.

The significant effects of attitude homophily on both credibility and PSI further highlight the importance of perceived similarity in influencer communication. Shared values, interests, and lifestyles may reduce perceived psychological distance and contribute to both favourable credibility evaluations and greater interpersonal involvement with influencers (McPherson et al., 2001; Jin & Phua, 2014; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Notably, attitude homophily showed a stronger association with PSI ($\beta = 0.375$) than with credibility ($\beta = 0.215$), suggesting that perceived similarity may be particularly relevant to audiences' perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers. Social attractiveness also significantly enhanced PSI, indicating that interpersonal appeal, such as perceived friendliness and social desirability, may facilitate audiences' interpersonal involvement with influencers (Rubin et al., 1985; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Taken together, these findings suggest that similarity and social appeal are particularly relevant to PSI, while attitude homophily also contributes to consumers' credibility evaluations.

The results also confirm the importance of both credibility and PSI in explaining purchase intention, while revealing a clear difference in their relative strengths. PSI showed a substantially stronger association with purchase intention ($\beta = 0.465$, $f^2 = 0.307$) than credibility ($\beta = 0.251$, $f^2 = 0.089$). This pattern suggests that, within the TikTok food influencer context, consumers' perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers may be more consequential for purchase intention than credibility-based evaluation alone. While credibility remains important in reducing uncertainty and supporting consumers' acceptance of influencer recommendations (Lou & Yuan, 2019), the stronger role of PSI is consistent with research showing that repeated mediated exposure and perceived interaction can increase audiences' familiarity and psychological involvement with media figures, which may subsequently influence behavioural intentions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin et al., 1985; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Taken together, these findings indicate that credibility and PSI operate as complementary rather than competing mechanisms, but their relative contributions to purchase intention are unequal in this context.

The mediation findings further reinforce the differentiated pattern observed across the model. Credibility significantly mediated the relationships between physical attractiveness and purchase intention and between attitude homophily and purchase intention, whereas PSI significantly mediated the effects of social attractiveness and attitude homophily on purchase intention. By contrast, the indirect effect of physical attractiveness on purchase intention through PSI was not significant. Importantly, the strongest indirect effect was observed for attitude homophily through PSI ($\beta = 0.174$), while physical attractiveness showed a significant indirect effect through credibility ($\beta = 0.107$). These results indicate that influencer attributes are transmitted to purchase intention through different mediating mechanisms with unequal strengths. In particular, physical attractiveness appears to operate primarily through credibility-based evaluation, whereas attitude homophily operates through both credibility and PSI, with its strongest indirect association occurring through PSI.

Viewed holistically, the originality of these findings lies not merely in applying existing influencer theories to the TikTok food marketing context, but in revealing a differentiated configuration of persuasive mechanisms within the same model. Physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily do not function as interchangeable peripheral cues; instead, they show distinct associations with credibility and PSI, which in turn contribute to purchase intention with different strengths. The particularly strong role of PSI, together with the strongest indirect effect through attitude homophily and PSI, further suggests that interpersonal involvement is an important component of influencer persuasion alongside credibility-based evaluation. This integrated pattern provides a more nuanced explanation of how influencer attributes work together to shape purchase intention in short-form social commerce environments.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study advances influencer marketing research by moving beyond a uniform view of influencer persuasion and demonstrating that different influencer attributes operate through distinct but complementary mechanisms in short-form

social commerce environments. Specifically, the findings extend existing knowledge in three respects: by differentiating the roles of influencer-related peripheral cues within the ELM, extending PSI research into social commerce contexts, and integrating ELM and PSI with source credibility insights to provide a more comprehensive explanation of influencer persuasion.

First, this study contributes to ELM by differentiating the roles of distinct influencer-related peripheral cues within the peripheral route. Rather than treating peripheral cues as a homogeneous category, the findings show that physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily are associated with different persuasive mechanisms. Physical attractiveness was primarily associated with credibility, social attractiveness was associated with PSI, while attitude homophily was associated with both credibility and PSI, with a stronger association with PSI. This differentiated pattern suggests that peripheral cues are not functionally equivalent in influencer persuasion. This distinction is particularly relevant in fast-paced and visually oriented short-form video environments such as TikTok, where readily observable communicator-related cues may become especially salient in shaping consumer responses. By distinguishing how different peripheral cues operate within the same persuasive context, the study provides a more nuanced application of the peripheral route of ELM to short-form influencer marketing.

Second, this study extends parasocial interaction (PSI) research by demonstrating the relevance of perceived interpersonal involvement within short-form social commerce environments. Originally introduced to describe audiences' perceived interaction with media figures during mediated exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956), PSI has traditionally been examined in television and celebrity contexts. The present findings show that PSI is also relevant to highly interactive and commercialised digital environments, where social attractiveness and attitude homophily are associated with stronger perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers. By identifying differentiated associations between influencer attributes and PSI, this study extends previous research by showing that interpersonal appeal and perceived similarity are particularly relevant to parasocial involvement in short-form social commerce environments (Rubin et al., 1985; Jin & Phua, 2014).

Third, this study provides a more integrated explanation of influencer persuasion by bringing together ELM, source credibility, and PSI perspectives while recognising their distinct theoretical roles. ELM explains how influencer-related attributes can function as peripheral persuasive cues, while the source credibility perspective helps explain how such cues may shape consumers' evaluations of influencers as credible information sources. PSI theory complements these perspectives by accounting for audiences' perceived interaction and psychological involvement with influencers. The findings show that credibility and PSI represent distinct but complementary mechanisms: both contribute to purchase intention, but their antecedent patterns and relative effects differ. In particular, the stronger effect of PSI on purchase intention suggests that perceived interpersonal involvement may be especially consequential in short-form social commerce environments. Together, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive explanation of how different influencer attributes shape consumer responses through credibility-based evaluation and parasocial interaction.

Collectively, these findings provide a more nuanced explanation of influencer persuasion by demonstrating that consumer responses in short-form social commerce are shaped by the interplay between credibility-based evaluation and perceived interpersonal involvement.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings provide practical implications for TikTok food influencers, brand managers, and social media platforms by showing that effective influencer marketing should consider how different influencer attributes contribute to credibility and parasocial interaction rather than relying on popularity or visual appeal alone.

For TikTok food influencers, the findings highlight the importance of combining credibility building with practices that encourage audience involvement. Although physical attractiveness was positively associated with credibility, its relationship with PSI was not significant, suggesting that visual appeal alone may be insufficient to foster perceived interpersonal involvement. Influencers may therefore complement visual presentation with authentic self-presentation, interactive communication, and content reflecting followers' shared interests and values. Given the stronger effect of PSI on purchase intention, maintaining audience engagement through comments, live interactions, and personalised responses may be particularly relevant for strengthening psychological involvement and purchase willingness.

For brand managers, influencer selection should extend beyond indicators such as follower size and popularity. The findings suggest that different influencer characteristics may serve different persuasive functions. Influencers perceived as credible may be effective for communicating product information, whereas those demonstrating social attractiveness and perceived similarity with audiences may be particularly relevant for fostering interpersonal involvement. Therefore, brands should consider influencer-brand fit and audience alignment when designing food marketing campaigns.

For social media platforms, the findings highlight the importance of features that facilitate meaningful influencer–audience interaction. Recommendation algorithms, commenting, livestreaming, and other engagement features may create opportunities for repeated exposure and perceived interpersonal involvement. Platforms may therefore optimise creator recommendation systems using not only popularity indicators but also engagement signals reflecting meaningful interaction and audience retention, thereby strengthening user engagement and influencer-based commerce.

Taken together, these implications suggest that effective TikTok food influencer marketing requires an integrated approach that combines credibility building, audience involvement, and platform-supported interaction.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research.

The first limitation concerns the sample and research context. This study focused on young consumers in three major Chinese cities, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to consumers from different regions, demographic groups, or cultural backgrounds. Future research could adopt broader sampling approaches and conduct cross-regional or cross-cultural comparisons to examine whether the proposed relationships vary across different consumer contexts.

Another limitation is that this study examined TikTok food influencer marketing within a specific product category and platform environment. Although food-related consumption provides an important context for understanding influencer persuasion, consumer responses may differ across product categories and social media platforms. Future studies could extend this research by comparing different industries, such as beauty, fashion, or technology products, and examining whether the effects of influencer attributes vary across different digital environments.

Finally, this study employed a cross-sectional survey design, which limits the ability to capture changes in consumers' perceptions and responses over time. Although the findings demonstrate significant relationships among influencer attributes, credibility, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention, longitudinal research or experimental approaches could provide deeper insights into how these mechanisms evolve through repeated exposure and interaction. Future research could also examine whether repeated parasocial interactions contribute to the development of more enduring parasocial relationships over time.

7. Conclusion

Drawing on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and parasocial interaction (PSI) theory, this study examined how physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and attitude homophily influence young Chinese consumers' purchase intentions through credibility and PSI in TikTok food influencer marketing.

The findings reveal a differentiated pattern across influencer attributes. Physical attractiveness was primarily associated with credibility, social attractiveness with PSI, while attitude homophily contributed to both credibility and PSI, with a stronger association with PSI. Both credibility and PSI significantly increased purchase intention, with PSI demonstrating the stronger effect. These findings indicate that influencer attributes are not functionally equivalent persuasive cues but operate through distinct yet complementary mechanisms of credibility-based evaluation and perceived interpersonal involvement.

The study therefore advances understanding of influencer persuasion in short-form social commerce by demonstrating how different communicator-related cues operate through credibility-based evaluation and perceived interpersonal involvement. It also provides practical guidance for brands and influencers by highlighting the importance of considering both source evaluation and interpersonal engagement when developing TikTok influencer marketing strategies.

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Author contributions

Zhuang Tian was primarily responsible for the study conceptualisation, research design, data collection, data analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. Dr. Wan Anita Wan Abas and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Akmar Hayati Ahmad Ghazali provided academic supervision, contributed to the research design, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. Xianlu Zhao contributed to the review and revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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