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[See table of contents](#)

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#### Article abstract

This research examines the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in higher education brand strategy, focusing on how their characteristics influence attitudes in a multicultural context. The model explores the relationships between SMIs' attributes—social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and interactivity—and perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness, as well as their impact on brand trust. Based on a study of 276 participants using structural equation modeling, the findings reveal that SMIs significantly influence brand trust, with trustworthiness being the strongest predictor. Interestingly, authenticity had less impact, while global identity behaviors led to more uniform perceptions across diverse groups.



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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in higher education brand strategy, focusing on how their characteristics influence attitudes in a multicultural context. The model explores the relationships between SMIs' attributes—social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and interactivity—and perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness, as well as their impact on brand trust. Based on a study of 276 participants using structural equation modeling, the findings reveal that SMIs significantly influence brand trust, with trustworthiness being the strongest predictor. Interestingly, authenticity had less impact, while global identity behaviors led to more uniform perceptions across diverse groups.

Keywords: cross-cultural, digital marketing, higher education and research, influencer marketing, influencer power, social media

## Résumé

Cette recherche examine le rôle des influenceurs sur les réseaux sociaux (SMI) dans la stratégie de marque de l'enseignement supérieur et leur influence sur les attitudes dans un contexte multiculturel. Le modèle analyse les relations entre les attributs des SMI (attractivité sociale, homophilie d'attitude, interactivité) et les attributs perçus (expertise, authenticité, fiabilité), ainsi que leur impact sur la confiance dans la marque. L'étude, menée auprès de 276 participants, utilise la modélisation par équations structurelles et une analyse multigroupe. Les résultats montrent que les SMI sont cruciaux dans la stratégie des marques, la fiabilité étant le meilleur prédicteur de la confiance, tandis que l'authenticité joue un rôle moindre. L'identité globale conduit à des perceptions plus uniformes.

Mots-clés : cross-culturel, enseignement supérieur et recherche, marketing d'influence, marketing digital, réseaux sociaux, pouvoir de l'influenceur

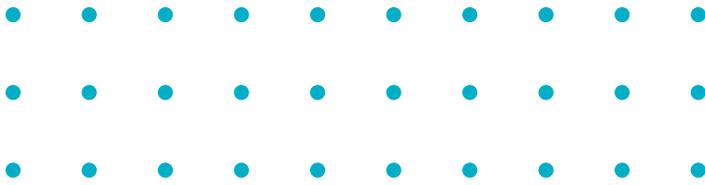
## Resumen

Esta investigación examina el papel de los *influencers* de redes sociales (SMI) en la estrategia de marca de la educación superior y su impacto en las actitudes en un contexto multicultural. El modelo explora las relaciones entre los atributos de los SMI (atractividad social, homofilia de actitud e interactividad) y los atributos percibidos (*expertise*, autenticidad y confiabilidad), y su impacto en la confianza en la marca. El estudio, con 276 participantes, usó modelado estructural y análisis multigrupo. Los resultados destacan la importancia de los SMI en la estrategia de marca, siendo la confiabilidad el mayor predictor de confianza, mientras que la autenticidad tuvo menor impacto. La identidad global generó percepciones más uniformes.

Palabras Clave: educación superior e investigación, interculturalidad, marketing de influencia, marketing digital, medios sociales, poder de los *influencers*

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In today's environment, higher educational institutions edge their policies to increase student enrolment due to marketisation (Faham *et al.*, 2017; Yu *et al.*, 2018). To address concerns related to student recruitment and partnership development, branding has established itself as a key method (Chapleo, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Countries with renowned education systems, such as France and Canada, serve as prime examples. France's education system, which caters to over 2.7 million students, generates approximately 30 billion Euros annually and stands out due to its substantial state support and focus on international markets (Campus France, 2022). Similarly, the Canadian system, with a population of up to 2.2 million students, is worth more than CAD 40 billion annually (Government of Canada, 2022). As both nations apply marketing to promote their national competitiveness, they make progress in attracting prestigious institutions, influencers, and job opportunities for graduates. They also aim to establish relevant relationships to enhance their position in the international education market. According to Suomi *et al.* (2014), education tends to be an experience-based activity, which makes quality assessment difficult. This led to the scenario where reputation and imagery became measurable elements of quality with prominence in the process of university evaluation and selection (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Given that students are unable to "sample" their education first and later commit the better part of several years to their studies, the issue of selecting an HEI becomes important and complicated, with no room for errors (Khanna *et al.*, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Towers & Towers, 2020). Influential factors such as teachers, friends, digital media, and college-based advisors play a significant role in decision-making. McNicholas & Marcella (2022), Poole *et al.* (2023), and others discuss how these elements contribute to shaping one's choices.

In this context, the role of SMIs is becoming increasingly crucial in shaping students' attitudes because their opinion is perceived as authentic and trustworthy (Uzunolu & Misci Kip, 2014). Given their ability to rapidly reach a broad and diverse audience, SMIs are more efficient and impactful than traditional advertising campaigns (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The benefits derived from influencers make them effective spokespersons for brands, including HEIs (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Until recently, there have been few systematic analyses of the impact of social media on university brands (Nevzat *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, HEIs attempting to implement social media interaction lack guidance on how it might impact their brand's value (Minocha *et al.*, 2017). "Edu-influencers" represent a promising and relatively unexplored field of investigation (Shelton *et al.*, 2020; Carpenter & Wilson, 2022).

Despite the impressive growth in the use of social media, academic research lacks the mechanism and implications of an influencer's role in shaping student attitudes toward HEI brands. To bridge the existing gaps, this research delves into the determinants of influencer marketing success concerning its impact on consumer perceptions of HEIs. The objective is to examine how brand trust is influenced by SMIs' attributes and communication practices. Drawing from a review of influencer marketing literature and strategies, six factors contributing to brand trust and linked to SMIs' characteristics were identified and examined in a comparative context of HEIs in France and Canada. As Canada is a member of the Francophonie, students who have mastered French are eligible to study in French and

Canadian institutions. This research contributes to the existing literature theoretically and empirically by 1) *presenting the critical role of SMIs in influencing the brand image of HEIs*; 2) *demonstrating the significant role played by perceived trustworthiness, authenticity, and expertise of SMIs in creating positive brand trust in HEIs*; 3) *highlighting the importance of unique communication patterns in social media and identification between influencers and followers via attitude homophily, interactivity, and social attractiveness*; and 4) *providing advice to HEIs in terms of collaborating with SMIs for impactful branding*.

## Literature review

### Branding in Higher Education Institutions

In light of this paradigm shift in HEIs, the role of SMIs is becoming interesting to study. Thus, as HEIs have adopted progressive techniques to engage students, SMIs offer powerful means to impact their perceptions and foster a significant evolution in higher education marketing. Extensive research has documented that universities have undergone commercialization processes in recent years. In response to competitive pressures, HEIs increasingly adopt marketing and branding strategies typically linked with the for-profit sector (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). HEIs have progressively embraced a student-centred marketing orientation. The current landscape of higher education is marked by a noticeable shift towards a market-driven, corporate-style academy (McMillan & Cheney, 1996), with branding now widely acknowledged as an extension of the "student as consumer" concept. This shift in perspective has enabled the adoption of these practices (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Recent research has explored branding strategies within, highlighting the need for further investigation into their applicability and impact (Chapleo, 2011). Khanna *et al.* (2014) emphasise the need to "research the factors that help to create and build brands" (p. 124), and several studies have investigated various aspects of branding by testing students (Balaji *et al.*, 2016; Foroudi *et al.*, 2019). HEIs have recently adopted social media (Ngai *et al.*, 2015) for branding, entailing the development of communication and promotional strategies to engage students through various platforms. This type of marketing is particularly important for HEIs to connect with prospective students (Lacka & Wong 2021) because they have a very high social media use (Liu *et al.* 2021). Though HEIs have embraced social media in pedagogy and education delivery, its use for branding institutions is underexplored (Gai *et al.*, 2016). Notable studies by Jan & Ammari (2016) and Royo-Vela & Hünermund (2016) tried to bridge this gap by exploring the impact of HEI marketing endeavours, including their websites, search engine optimisation, and social media optimisation, on students' decision-making processes. Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017) highlighted the aspect of student-to-student engagement on social media as a precursor of branding. Recent work by Alfonzo (2023) adds to this by explaining how specialists managing HEIs' social media accounts with high levels of engagement generate and leverage social media content. Social media marketing's influence on brand equity, studied by Perera *et al.* (2023), established the multidimensional nature of brand equity and how it relates to various marketing efforts. Influencer marketing—a key aspect of social media marketing—remains unexplored in the context of HEIs, yet influencers play a crucial role because of their credibility and connection with their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021).

## Social Media Influencers' role in branding

Influencers on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (X), and TikTok are distinguished by their recognised expertise and perceived knowledge in specific subject matters, which is evident in their consistent creation and dissemination of content. Social media users actively subscribe to these influencers (Geyser, 2022), esteemed for their perceived reliability in providing information or guidance (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). SMIs' communication differs from traditional methods as their content appears more organic, engaging, authentic, and personal (Liu, 2021). The engaging nature of influencers has become a key marketing strategy (Lou and Yuan, 2019), and companies collaborate with SMIs as independent third-party endorsers of products and services (Freberg *et al.*, 2011; Lou, 2022). Previous research has shown that HEI branding generates awareness and recognition from multiple stakeholders (Chapleo, 2011). SMIs could be educators, student advocates, and other influencers who regularly post content related to universities and higher education. Though practical relevance is increasing, scholarly research has yet to be developed on the phenomena of influencers in the context of HEIs. "Cool" influencers, often considered "close friends" or even "family members" by their followers (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020), find themselves at the centre of marketing, with brands seeking their endorsement (Ember, 2015) to gain the trust and attention of their followers. Therefore, influencers with specific characteristics are well-received by followers, and their content generates better communication outcomes (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Studies have highlighted the underlying dynamics of such traits and how they lead to favourable outcomes such as brand trust (Kim & Kim, 2021; Masuda, 2022), which can be extended to the context of HEIs.

## The cultural dimension

Researchers widely agree that a thorough understanding of culture and cultural differences is an important prerequisite for successful international advertising (Zhou *et al.*, 2015). Recent studies indicate that in both France and Canada, social networking platforms are used by most of the population; Instagram is popular in both nations among 18 to 44-year-olds, with 71.6% of users in Canada and 74.9% in France (Statista, 2022a,b). Cultural contexts can influence customers' social media usage behaviours (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013), so it remains crucial to understand cultural differences to make marketing messages relevant to local markets (Berthon *et al.*, 2012).

## Conceptual development and hypotheses

Contemporary scholarly investigations have scrutinised the characteristics and narrative methodologies employed by SMIs (Zhou *et al.*, 2021). This study draws from the persuasion theory (McGuire *et al.*, 2001), the source attractiveness model (McGuire *et al.*, 1985), and the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990) to explain how consumer perception of SMIs' endorsements can enhance their trust in brands. Persuasion is a process to change someone's behaviour or attitude (Dotson & Hyatt, 2000). Influencing people to buy a product can be seen as persuasion. According to McGuire *et al.* (2001), persuasion theory consists of two parts: input variables (communication variables) and output mediational steps (persuasion). Studies on consumer evaluations of information quality and credibility have used this concept widely (Huang *et al.*, 2018) and have shown that message source characteristics and attributes play a more prominent role in persuasion than arguments themselves (Farace *et al.*, 2017). Based on this theory, followers' perceptions of influencers (such as trustworthiness) can affect their behaviour (i.e., trust toward the brand). According to the source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985), an attractive source tends to increase persuasion. Influencers' attractiveness induces followers to mimic their popularity and lifestyle (Okazaki *et al.*, 2014),

leading to such behavioural changes across dimensions as a positive brand image (Hermenda *et al.*, 2019) and improved purchase intention (Torres *et al.*, 2019). Past research has examined the endorser's attractiveness as an important determinant of persuasion (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011; Till & Busler, 2000). Additional characteristics have been recently associated with this concept, including attitude homophily (Kim & Kim, 2021) and interactivity (Jun & Yi, 2020). Attitude homophily is related to similarity, and SMIs perceived by their followers as being like them may also be an effective marketing tool (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Interactivity, characterised as the bidirectional communication between influencers and their followers, manifests through comments and feedback on the influencer's social network account; this serves as a motivational factor for individuals to consistently partake in online communities, consequently contributing to heightened levels of engagement (Islam and Rahman, 2017). Credibility is one of the most critical determinants of the persuasiveness of a source (Hovland *et al.*, 1953; Ohanian, 1990). It can be argued that SMIs who are perceived as credible have an enhanced persuasive association with their endorsed brands. The source credibility model explains the extent to which the source is perceived as imparting information on a product (Ohanian, 1990); thus, the credibility of a source depends on their "trustworthiness" and "expertness" (Hovland *et al.*, 1953). Brand trust can increase when consumers feel that the brand is sincere (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019); if followers feel that SMIs enjoy creating content without expecting external compensation, they are more confident that the content reflects the influencer's thinking rather than being manipulated or edited by a third-party intervention. The literature review identified six attributes as key influencers of brand awareness and purchase intention. We include all six constructs in our model as predictors of brand trust. The conceptual framework is summarised in Figure 1 and is explained further below.

## Social Attractiveness

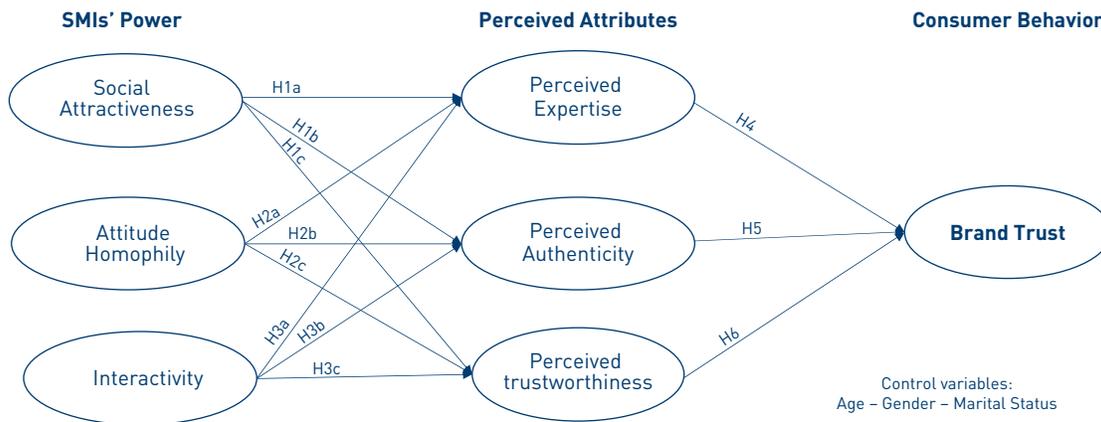
Social attractiveness refers to the likability of a speaker (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) and a person's ability to influence the mental state of others and be accepted and approved by society. Communication formed in the presence of social attraction leads to a likability that changes the audience's attitude. High social attractiveness leads to a positive evaluation of the content by followers regarding credibility and expertise (Lou & Yuan, 2019). A large number of followers associates high social capital with social attractiveness, which leads to a positive evaluation of a person's level of expertise (Jin & Phua, 2014). Also, social attractiveness has been found to positively influence users' perceived trustworthiness (Toma, 2014; Masuda *et al.*, 2022). Following the source credibility theory, relational trust is influenced by two dimensions of source credibility: expertise and authenticity. The cultivation of authenticity enables influencers to establish trust with their audiences, thereby exerting a discernible impact on the behaviours of the latter. The following hypotheses were proposed:

*H1: Social Attractiveness is positively associated with SMIs' a) perceived expertise; b) perceived authenticity; c) perceived trustworthiness.*

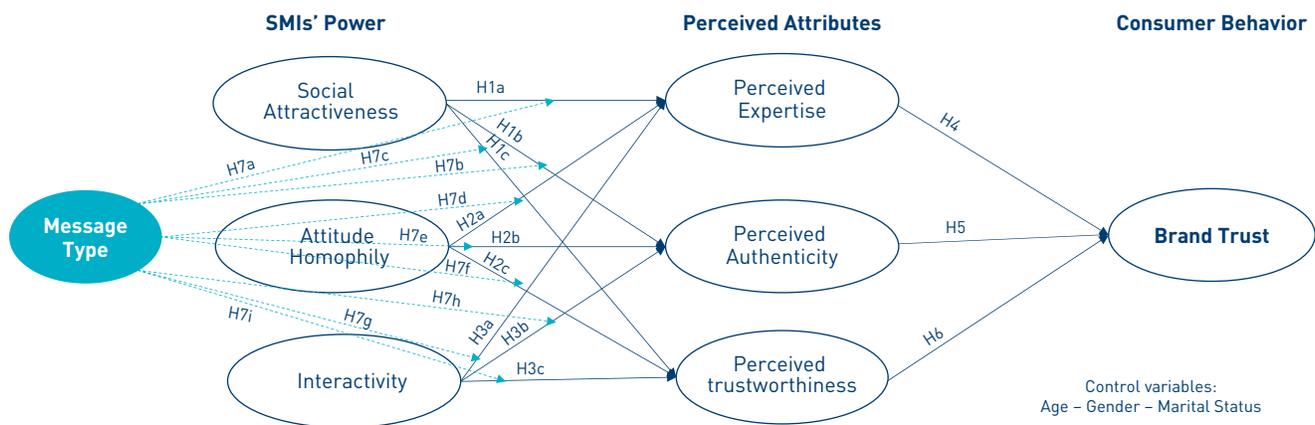
## Attitude Homophily

A high degree of congruence between a follower's ideal self-image and the SMI's image leads to more effective endorsement outcomes through the mechanism of attitude homophily. As discussed, attitude homophily relates to perceived similarity, which enhances the effectiveness of endorsements when congruence exists between the SMI's image and the follower's ideal self. In the health sector, Wang *et al.* (2008) found that homophily drove the persuasion process, with perceptions of credibility—including expertise—based on similarity. Simply put, the more homophilous the online information stimuli, the more likely people are to adopt the proposed advice.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Proposed Research Model**



**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Proposed Research Model**



This congruence fosters an increased perception of expertise among followers. Additionally, gaps in the literature regarding the relationship between attitude homophily and perceived authenticity emphasize the importance of investigating this association. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) suggest that homophily also affects an SMI's perceived authenticity and trustworthiness, which is particularly evident in industries like beauty (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020) and healthcare (Wang *et al.*, 2008). For example, homophily based on factors like attitude, value, context, and appearance has been shown to enhance the perceived expertise of vloggers in the beauty industry, leading to stronger emotional attachment (Ladhari *et al.*, 2020). Perceived similarity further creates positive feelings between groups, reduces uncertainty (Simons *et al.*, 1970), and increases engagement as well as perceived information quality (Wang *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2018). These elements together enhance the authenticity and credibility of SMIs. Therefore, we hypothesize:

*H2: Attitude Homophily is positively associated with SMIs' a) perceived expertise; b) perceived authenticity; and c) perceived trustworthiness.*

### Interactivity

Research indicates that interaction and collaboration between influencers and consumers enhance the effects of eWOM while simultaneously improving consumer engagement. Thus, Kretz and de Valck (2010) examined how fashion bloggers build expertise by demonstrating and arguing about the performance of products. Accordingly, we propose that interactivity positively affects an influencer's perceived expertise. Studies indicate that interactivity with social influencers impact information signals, affecting the level of trustworthiness regarding the disseminated information (Luo *et al.*, 2013). Jun and Yi (2020) showed that influencers' interactivity significantly and positively affected their perceived authenticity. People's experience of trust in brands with respect to social

media marketing increases with their online interactivity (Tatar & Eren-Erdo Gmus, 2016). Online interpersonal interactions influence social media users' perceptions of the credibility and trustworthiness of the information provided (Sundar, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2012). Thus, we hypothesize:

*H3: Interactivity is positively associated with SMIs' a) perceived expertise; b) perceived authenticity; c) perceived trustworthiness.*

### SMIs' perceived expertise and brand trust

Expertise is conceptualized as the perception that "a communicator is a source of valid claims" (Hovland *et al.*, 1953), and it exerts a significant positive influence on both brand attitude and purchase intention (Till & Busler, 2000). Persuasion theory suggests that followers are more inclined to trust brands when they perceive influencers as credible experts (Sternthal *et al.*, 1978). The persuasive influence of a source exhibiting expertise is significantly greater than that of a non-expert source, with individuals being more inclined to align with the opinions of experts over those of non-experts (Horai *et al.*, 1974). Furthermore, Delgado *et al.* (2005) define brand trust as "the confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intentions," suggesting that expertise can directly and positively enhance brand trust. In the context of social media influencers (SMIs), perceived expertise plays a crucial role in shaping followers' trust in the brand. When influencers lack demonstrable expertise, their perceived credibility diminishes, weakening brand trust (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Given the strong influence of perceived expertise on brand trust, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H4: SMIs' perceived expertise is positively associated with brand trust.*

### SMIs' perceived SMI's perceived trustworthiness and brand trust

Trust is a fundamental driver of social relationships, fostering consumer confidence and reducing uncertainty (Gopichandran & Chetlapalli, 2013; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In the context of social media influencers (SMIs), followers evaluate an influencer's attributes—such as trustworthiness—based on their individual assessments, which can directly influence their behavior and trust towards the associated brand. According to Rogers and Bhowmik (1970), credibility is a key factor in determining one's ability to trust and rely on a source, with Sternthal *et al.* (1978) suggesting that credibility is built upon two key components: trustworthiness and expertise. Trustworthiness reflects how the audience perceives the speaker's claims and is primarily based on the speaker's honesty and the extent to which the audience feels they care about them, or goodwill (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). SMIs who are perceived as trustworthy can significantly enhance brand trust (Leite & Baptista, 2022), as trustworthiness plays a crucial role in establishing a strong connection between the influencer and their audience. Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2021) further demonstrated that trustworthiness has the most substantial impact on brand trust among all influencer attributes.

Therefore, given the essential role of perceived trustworthiness in shaping brand trust, we hypothesize:

*H5: Perceived trustworthiness is positively associated with brand trust.*

### SMI's perceived authenticity and brand trust

Authenticity in sociology is conceptualized as the ability to appear true to oneself and others, encompassing attributes such as sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness, and originality (Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Mollada, 2010). In the context of marketing communication, Baker and Martinson (2002) argue that authenticity depends on the communicator's openness and personal identification as the persuader. Social media influencers (SMIs) who

endorse products or services are often perceived as embodying authenticity (Boerman *et al.*, 2017), a quality increasingly valued in marketing research. This perception is driven by the growing consumer demand for authentic brands and products (Chronis & Hampton, 2008). When followers believe that influencers genuinely enjoy creating content and are not solely motivated by external compensation, they are more likely to view the content as a reflection of the influencer's true preferences, rather than being manipulated by third parties. Authenticity thus becomes a key factor in fostering trust, as consumers are more likely to trust influencers whose content aligns with their intrinsic motivations. Given the significance of authenticity in shaping consumer trust, we hypothesize:

*H6: SMIs' perceived authenticity is positively associated with brand trust.*

### Moderating role of message type

A significant impact may also be exerted by the way SMIs communicate, particularly in the type of message they select to accompany their social media posts. The text they choose can influence their followers' perceptions. Warner and Forward (2016) explain that rational and emotional messages are designed differently. Rational messages convey factual information, require logical reasoning, and engage reflective cognitive processes. In contrast, emotional messages evoke a range of emotional responses, both positive and negative, and appeal to more immediate, instinctive reactions. These differences in message type can influence various interactions and affect how followers perceive influencers. In this context, we expect the message type to play a key moderating role in the relationships between the three SMI power variables (social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and interactivity) and the three SMI perceived characteristics variables (perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness). Specifically, the type of message (emotional or rational) may alter how these power dynamics and perceived traits affect followers' trust and engagement. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

*H7a-b-c-d-e-f-g-h-i: The message type (emotional and rational) moderates the relationships between SMI power variables (attitude homophily, social attractiveness, and interactivity) and SMI perceived characteristics variables (perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness) in the research model.*

### Methodological approach

Influencers are harnessing the power of social media to distribute materials that cater to the needs of both students and educators. These materials range from instructional concepts to motivational resources, all crafted with the educational context in mind. Instagram has quickly ascended to become a leading platform for sharing imagery and video content. It is a preferred venue for influencers and brands to conduct influencer marketing campaigns. Given its prominence, this study focuses on Instagram as the principal channel for influencers specialising in higher education to connect with their target audience. To illustrate this, we created vignettes that depict education advocates as SMIs designed to mimic an authentic Instagram post. We included a diverse array of male and female influencers, each with an identical follower count. Accompanying their image was an emotional or rational message promoting a fictional university to prevent preconceived notions about the institution from swaying the participants. Profiles of "fictitious influencers" were used, ensuring that the panel of Instagram users—our study's respondents—remained unbiased toward any profile they have been exposed to. Participants were randomly shown a single Instagram post before being asked to complete a subsequent questionnaire. Sample vignettes are provided in Appendix 1. The survey's constructs were based on a multi-item structure, with items derived from previous studies. Table 1 lists these items and

their sources. Harman's one-factor analysis was performed to address potential biases, indicating no common method bias. This was further validated by including a common method factor in a second measurement model. Additionally, the variance inflation factor (VIF) indicators were used to confirm the validity of the collected data, effectively reducing the risk of multicollinearity bias.

All measurement scales have been adopted from the literature. The social attractiveness scale was based on Duran and Kelly (1988) (4 items). The measures of attitude homophily, perceived expertise, and trustworthiness consist of 4 items each and are derived from the work of Lou and Kim (2019). The measure of interactivity, also based on 4 items, is derived from the work by Thorson and Rodgers (2006). The concept of perceived authenticity was based on the scale established by Moulard *et al.* in 2016 and has 4 items. Finally, brand trust was assessed according to the work of Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001 (4 items). Table 1 depicts the measures of each variable in the questionnaire and the related literature. The data collection lasted over two months. To collect high-quality data, screening questions were placed at the beginning of the survey to verify whether the respondents were regular users of social media platforms, allowing us to recruit only those who were. All participants were social media users, most indicating their preference for Instagram and excellent knowledge of the platform and SMIs, principally due to their age and lifestyle. Data collection was carried out anonymously. As this research was conducted in a French-speaking context, so the questions were adapted for a French panel. To evaluate the efficacy and clarity of both rational and emotional messages, a sequence of pre-tests and pilot studies was undertaken to ensure the survey's reliability and the validity of its content. A group of 20 individuals, representing our target demographic, were enlisted to evaluate and classify the message types during this preliminary phase. This step was crucial to ensure that the study's participants correctly identified the messages. The study recruited 345 individuals, with 276 questionnaires completed thoroughly and discarding any that were incomplete or unclear. The survey was administered via Qualtrics™ and targeted a student demographic in France and Canada—known for their high social media engagement and online information-seeking behaviour. The survey was distributed either through a panel via email, which included a URL to the survey, or through an anonymous link. To minimise context effects on measurement, the questionnaire items were randomised. The survey featured closed-ended questions on a five-point Likert scale, asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This questionnaire was tailor-made for this study and was translated into French using a back-translation method (Brislin, 1970). Academic experts also reviewed it for readability. Following best practices for survey development and to refine the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with 20 individuals matching the target demographic. Feedback from this group was solicited for the improvement and finalisation of the survey, and these individuals were excluded from the final sample (Martins *et al.*, 2019). The final sample comprised 67.03% female respondents and 32.97% male respondents. The participants' levels of education were structured as follows: 34.55% of respondents were high school graduates; 17.45% had a bachelor's degree; 14.18% were at the graduate level; and 26.91% were at the post-graduate level, with approximately 4% of respondents having a PhD (see Table 2). Furthermore, 51.45% of those surveyed studied in France, compared to 48.55% in Canada. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the model and the research hypotheses on SmartPLS4. The results indicated that the psychometric quality of the constructs was satisfactory.

**TABLE 1**  
**Questionnaire Measures**

Construct	Item	Measure
Social Attractiveness (Duran & Kelly, 1988)	SA1	I think this influencer could be my friend
	SA2	I wish I could converse with this influencer
	SA3	I think this influencer and I would be able to establish a friendly bond
	SA4	I think this influencer is similar to me in his/her way of being
Attitude Homophily (Lou & Kim, 2019)	AH1	This influencer and I have a lot in common
	AH1	This influencer and I are very similar
	AH3	This influencer seems to share my values
	AH4	This influencer thinks like me
Interactivity (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006)	I1	Interacting with this influencer would be like having a real conversation
	I2	I perceive this influencer as being responsive to my information needs
	I3	This influencer would respond to me quickly and efficiently
	I4	This influencer allows me to communicate directly with him/her
Perceived Expertise (Lou & Kim, 2019)	PE1	I find this influencer to be knowledgeable on the subject
	PE2	I consider this influencer to be an expert in this field
	PE3	I consider this influencer to be experienced enough to share statements about this topic
	PE4	I consider this influencer to be sufficiently qualified in his/her field to make these types of claims
Perceived Authenticity (Moulard <i>et al.</i> , 2016)	PA1	This influencer has a true passion for his/her field
	PA2	This influencer wants to do their best to share their content
	PA3	This influencer is dedicated to what they do on this social network (Instagram)
	PA4	This influencer is sincere in his/her content creation
Perceived Trustworthiness (Lou & Kim, 2019)	PT1	I find this influencer honest
	PT2	I find this influencer trustworthy
	PT3	I believe this influencer is telling the truth
	PT4	I believe what this influencer says and that they would not try to take advantage of their followers
Brand Trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)	BT1	I trust this influencer and the brand they recommend
	BT2	I can trust this influencer and what they recommend
	BT3	This influencer is an honest person with quality recommendations
	BT4	I would not hesitate to invest in what this influencer recommends

**TABLE 2**  
**Sociodemographic Information and Education Level of the Respondents**

Characteristics	Frequency	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	91	32.97
Female	185	67.03
<b>Country of Study</b>		
France	142	51.45
Canada	134	48.55
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	209	76.84
Married	15	5.51
Divorced	2	0.74
Common Law	46	16.91
<b>Age Group</b>		
18-25 years old	226	82.18
26-35 years old	33	12.00
36-49 years old	14	5.09
50 and above	2	0.73
<b>Education Level</b>		
No Education	8	2.91
High School	95	34.55
Bachelor's Degree	48	17.45
Graduate	39	14.18
Post-Graduate	74	26.91
PhD	11	4.00

## Results

The first step in validating the measurement model was to evaluate the item loadings on the relevant constructs to assess the reliability of the indicators. In the second step, composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha were used to assess each construct's internal consistency. Third, convergent validity was examined by comparing the average variance extracted (AVE) values of all the indicators for each construct. To assess discriminant validity, we used the heterotrait-monotrait correlation criterion (HTMT). Table 3 presents the results of the discriminant validity analysis according to the HTMT criterion. All the values were below 0.90, which confirms discriminant validity. As part of the structural model assessment, the first step is to ensure that there are no significant levels of collinearity between predictor constructs, which could create redundancy problems. A VIF can be used to determine this. All VIF values (see Table 4) in the research model were less than 5, demonstrating no critical multicollinearity issues. The significance of the hypothesised relationship between constructs was tested using bootstrapping in SmartPLS4. Except for H1a, H2b, and H5, the model was largely supported. The results are presented in Tables 5a and 5b. Both perceived expertise ( $\beta = 0.271, p = 0.000$ ) and perceived trustworthiness ( $\beta = 0.577, p = 0.000$ ) scored the highest compared with perceived authenticity ( $\beta = 0.029, p = 0.603$ ). Regarding associations between personal attributes and characterisation, interactivity had relatively strong associations ( $\beta = 0.386, 0.364, \text{ and } 0.359$ ) with perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness, respectively. Attitude homophily also maintained a significant but weaker association ( $\beta = 0.239, 0.085, \text{ and } 0.158$ , respectively). Social attractiveness had the lowest association overall ( $\beta = 0.069$  only for the path to perceived expertise).

**TABLE 3**  
**Assessment of discriminant validity using HTMT**

	AH	BT	I	PA	PE	PT	SA
AH							
BT	0.580						
I	0.629	0.602					
PA	0.443	0.646	0.598				
PE	0.565	0.760	0.654	0.691			
PT	0.546	0.866	0.647	0.777	0.766		
SA	0.827	0.632	0.660	0.475	0.531	0.578	

Note: HTMT = heterotrait-monotrait criterion

The convergent validity of the measurement model was assessed through an analysis of the AVE and composite reliability (CR). Table 4 indicates that convergent validity was supported here since the AVE was greater than 0.50 for each construct, suggesting that its measures better explained the variance of each construct than by error. Table 4 also demonstrates that the CR was systematically superior to the AVE for each construct, supporting convergent validity. Regarding discriminant validity, the data indicated that each construct correlated more with its measures (manifest variables) than with other constructs (latent variables). VIF indicators are satisfying and comply with norms, statistical requirements, and Cronbach's alpha indicators. As listed in Table 4, Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.811 to 0.904 for each construct. Moreover, the smallest CR was 0.822, higher than the recommended threshold of 0.7. These assessments confirmed each construct's internal consistency. Furthermore, all AVE values exceeded the minimum level of 0.50, indicating high convergent validity.

**TABLE 4**  
**Results of measurement model analysis**

Construct	Item	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	CR	AVE	VIF
Social Attractiveness	SA1	0.869	0.870	0.718	2.403
	SA2				2.232
	SA3				2.101
	SA4				1.877
Attitude Homophily	AH1	0.904	0.912	0.776	3.421
	AH2				3.245
	AH3				3.354
	AH4				3.372
Interactivity	I1	0.811	0.816	0.637	1.683
	I2				1.841
	I3				2.089
	I4				1.983
Perceived Expertise	PE1	0.868	0.871	0.718	2.046
	PE2				1.649
	PE3				2.531
	PE4				2.941
Perceived Authenticity	PA1	0.802	0.822	0.620	1.503
	PA2				2.097
	PA3				1.944
	PA4				1.419
Perceived Trustworthiness	PT1	0.891	0.892	0.755	3.097
	PT2				2.457
	PT3				2.776
	PT4				1.871
Brand Trust	BT1	0.889	0.903	0.751	2.987
	BT2				3.460
	BT3				2.597
	BT4				1.684

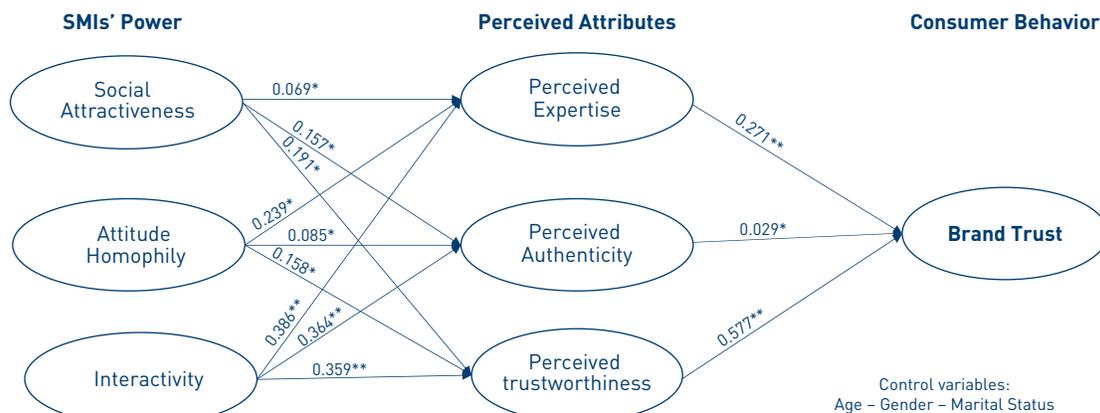
The structural model was constructed based on the hypothesised variable relationships (see Figure 2). The results of the tested model are shown in Table 5a. Twelve hypotheses were tested in the general research model, resulting in nine hypotheses being supported and validated. The model controlled for age, marital status, and gender. Based on the main effect results, no significant relationship was found between attitude homophily and perceived authenticity or between social attractiveness and perceived expertise. Similarly, the effect of perceived authenticity on brand trust was not significant.

A moderated relationship between SMI power variables (social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and interactivity) and SMI perceived characteristics variables (perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness) was also tested (see Figure 2.1). A moderation analysis was conducted for these paths, and the results show a significant impact only of interactivity on perceived expertise ( $\beta = 0.297, p = 0.023$ ) and interactivity on perceived trustworthiness ( $\beta = 0.268, p = 0.043$ ), therefore only validating hypotheses H7g and H7i. Table 5b presents the results of the tested model.

**TABLE 5a**  
**Results of structural model assessment**

	Structural Path	$\beta$	<i>p</i> -value	Hypotheses
H1a	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.069	0.350	Rejected
H1b	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	0.157	0.027	Accepted
H1c	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.191	0.010	Accepted
H2a	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.239	0.001	Accepted
H2b	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	0.085	0.293	Rejected
H2c	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.158	0.040	Accepted
H3a	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.386	0.000	Accepted
H3b	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	0.364	0.000	Accepted
H3c	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.359	0.000	Accepted
H4	SMI's Perceived Expertise → Brand Trust	0.271	0.000	Accepted
H5	SMI's Perceived Authenticity → Brand Trust	0.029	0.603	Rejected
H6	SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness → Brand Trust	0.577	0.000	Accepted
<b>Control variables</b>				
	Age Group → Brand Trust	0.057	0.160	
	Gender → Brand Trust	0.119	0.114	
	Marital Status → Brand Trust	0.037	0.291	

**FIGURE 2**  
**Standardized Results**



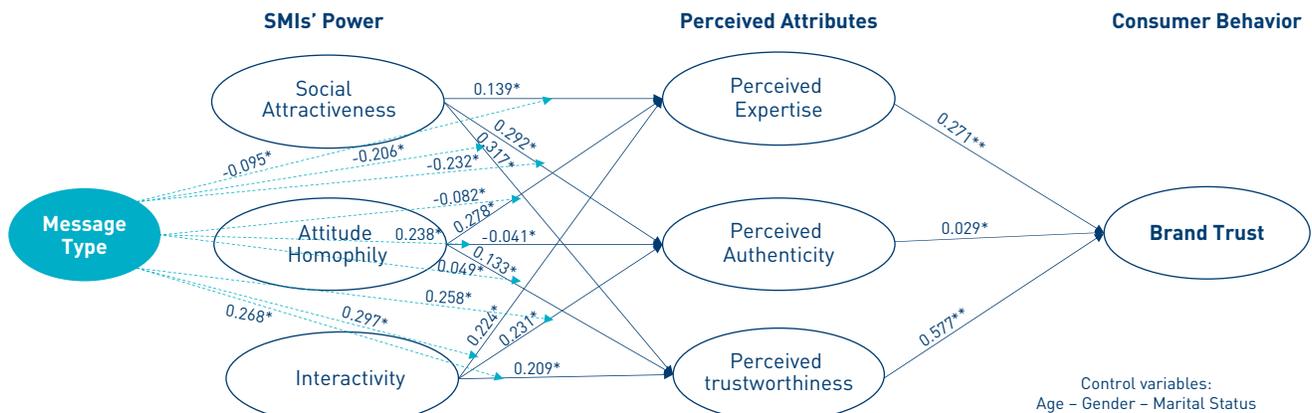
Note: \*\**p*-value = 0.000 \**p*-value > 0.000

TABLE 5b

Results of structural model assessment – Moderation Analysis

	Structural Path	$\beta$	p-value	Hypotheses
H1a	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.139	0.184	Rejected
H1b	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	0.292	0.002	Accepted
H1c	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.317	0.006	Accepted
H2a	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.278	0.001	Accepted
H2b	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	-0.041	0.678	Rejected
H2c	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.133	0.231	Rejected
H3a	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.224	0.011	Accepted
H3b	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	0.231	0.004	Accepted
H3c	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.209	0.015	Accepted
H4	SMI's Perceived Expertise → Brand Trust	0.271	0.000	Accepted
H5	SMI's Perceived Authenticity → Brand Trust	0.029	0.606	Rejected
H6	SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness → Brand Trust	0.577	0.000	Accepted
H7a	Message x Social attractiveness → SMI Expertise	-0.095	0.533	Rejected
H7b	Message x Social attractiveness → SMI Authenticity	-0.232	0.092	Rejected
H7c	Message x Social attractiveness → SMI Trustworthiness	-0.206	0.173	Rejected
H7d	Message x Attitude Homophily → SMI Expertise	-0.082	0.591	Rejected
H7e	Message x Attitude Homophily → SMI Authenticity	0.238	0.131	Rejected
H7f	Message x Attitude Homophily → SMI Trustworthiness	0.049	0.754	Rejected
H7g	Message x Interactivity → SMI Expertise	0.297	0.023	Accepted
H7h	Message x Interactivity → SMI Authenticity	0.258	0.050	Rejected
H7i	Message x Interactivity → SMI Trustworthiness	0.268	0.043	Accepted
<b>Control variables</b>				
	Age Group → Brand Trust	0.057	0.160	
	Gender → Brand Trust	0.119	0.114	
	Marital Status → Brand Trust	0.037	0.291	

FIGURE 2.1 Standardized Results



Note: \*\*p-value = 0.000 \*p-value > 0.000

Lastly, we conducted a multi-group analysis to confirm that our proposed model was moderated by the country of study (France and Canada). However, as demonstrated in Table 5c, there were no significant differences between the subgroups of French and Canadian respondents.

**TABLE 5c**  
**Multi-Group Analysis**

Welch-Satterthwaite test		Difference (Canada - France)	t value (Canada vs France)	p value (Canada vs France)
H1a	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Expertise	0.278	1.888	0.061
H1b	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	0.203	1.374	0.172
H1c	Social Attractiveness → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	0.207	1.296	0.197
H2a	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Expertise	-0.157	1.073	0.285
H2b	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	-0.079	0.474	0.636
H2c	Attitude Homophily → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	-0.174	1.078	0.283
H3a	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Expertise	-0.177	1.465	0.145
H3b	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Authenticity	-0.112	0.940	0.349
H3c	Interactivity → SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness	-0.004	0.031	0.975
H4	SMI's Perceived Expertise → Brand Trust	0.054	0.503	0.616
H5	SMI's Perceived Authenticity → Brand Trust	0.022	0.188	0.851
H6	SMI's Perceived Trustworthiness → Brand Trust	-0.015	0.147	0.883
<b>Control variables</b>				
	Age Group → Brand Trust	0.065	0.802	0.424
	Gender → Brand Trust	0.008	0.049	0.961
	Marital Status → Brand Trust	-0.042	0.588	0.558

Using SmartPLS4, we tested the squared multiple correlation ( $R^2$ ) for explanatory power and predictive relevance. The  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  values for the endogenous constructs are shown in Table 6.  $R^2$  measures the percentage of variance explained by the independent constructs in the model. The  $R^2$  model for the endogenous constructs ranged from 0.282 to 0.651, indicating a good amount of variance in the constructs being explained by the explanator constructs and the hypothesised models' good ability to explain the variance in the outcome construct.

**TABLE 6**  
 **$R^2$ ,  $R^2$  Adjusted**

Model Quality	$R^2$	$R^2$ Adjusted
BT	0.651	0.643
PA	0.282	0.274
PE	0.367	0.360
PT	0.375	0.368
<b>Fit Summary</b>	<b>Saturated model</b>	<b>Estimated model</b>
SRMR	0.070	0.106
d_uls	2.424	5.613
d_g	0.867	1.054
Chi-square	1359.769	1518.114
NFI	0.774	0.748

## Discussion

This research highlights the decisive role of influencers in higher education brand strategy, focusing particularly on the key characteristics that matter—trustworthiness, knowledge base, and social acceptability—which drive consumer behavior modification. Our findings support the significant role of influencers' interactivity with their community, which positively impacts perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness, shaping followers' perceptions of SMIs. In contrast, social attractiveness and attitude homophily show selective effects on these central variables. Regarding SMIs' perceived attributes, trustworthiness emerges as the strongest predictor of brand trust towards higher education institutions (HEIs), followed by expertise. Contrary to our expectations, authenticity, often presented as a key determinant of brand trust, did not significantly impact it. These findings underscore the crucial role of influencers' perceived trustworthiness and interactivity in establishing brand trust.

Additionally, this research proposes testing the moderating effect of message types. Our results reveal that interactivity, combined with the type of message (rational or emotional), positively impacts perceived expertise and trustworthiness, fostering stronger connections between followers and influencers on social networks. Finally, in contrast to previous studies that highlighted differences between multicultural environments, particularly between France and Canada, this research demonstrates that a globalized identity, behavior, and perception appear stronger than these differences. More specifically, respondents from both France and Canada perceived SMIs in a similar manner. Although this research primarily focuses on HEIs, it opens new avenues for future studies. The rise of SMIs, traditionally associated with commercial sectors, is also transforming non-market areas. Sectors such as healthcare, institutional organizations, and NGOs warrant further investigation. As the influence of SMIs grows, the non-market sphere must be prepared to adapt to this evolution.

### Theoretical contributions

Extant literature in influencer marketing indicates that influencers signify a unique persuasion mechanism for their followers by forging connection, engagement, and trust (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou & Kim, 2019). Extending this argument to HEIs, this study finds that influencers' characteristics such as social attractiveness, interactivity, and attitude homophily create perceptions of trustworthiness, authenticity, and expertise—constructs highly valued by followers and impactful in creating brand trust. This research offers an understanding of the persuasive power of influencer marketing, highlighting the critical role of an influencer's credibility in fostering positive customer attitudes. From a theoretical standpoint, the study's empirical findings show that Instagram influencers predominantly engender brand trust through perceived trustworthiness and expertise. Notably, despite expectations, no significant cultural differences were found between the French and Canadian groups, which may be attributed to the overarching influence of global identity and the pervasive effects of behavioural globalisation among Instagram users. Gao *et al.* (2017) expounded the concept of global identity encapsulates an individual's affinity for worldwide culture and their sense of kinship with the global populace. Rapid globalisation has prompted scholars to concur that global identities can shape consumer attitudes toward specific categories of products and services. This study posits that influencer marketing within the HEI sector is not immune to this worldwide identity phenomenon. The current study builds upon this foundation by integrating the concept of homophily, traditionally associated with interpersonal trust (McPherson *et al.*, 2001), into the domain of influencer marketing. Recent research by Masuda *et al.* (2022) further corroborates that such attributes as social attractiveness, attitude homophily, and physical attractiveness are instrumental

in cultivating parasocial relationships, which in turn, influence consumer purchase intentions. In the present study, both attitude homophily and interactivity were found to be positively correlated with perceived trustworthiness and expertise of SMIs. The nexus between interactivity and SMIs' perceived expertise and trustworthiness was particularly pronounced. These findings underscore the significance of attitude homophily and interactivity in bolstering the influence of SMIs across a diverse demographic in the context of HEIs and research. The study also shows the importance of interactive social media marketing (Islam & Rahman, 2017), affirming that heightened online interaction fosters greater brand trust (Tatar & Eren-Erdem, 2016). The positive interplay between SMIs and brands, as evidenced by Jun and Yi (2020), is reaffirmed in this study, and the insights gleaned from this study contribute to the academic discourse on influencer marketing by elucidating the persuasive mechanisms at play within social media's multifaceted relationship marketing framework. The study reveals that an influencer-endorsed educational brand is perceived as trustworthy. Consequently, in the HEIs and research sector, an influencer's trustworthiness profoundly influences students' selection of HEIs.

### Managerial implications

From a practical standpoint, this study offers valuable guidance for HEIs' social media marketers seeking to identify and collaborate with the most effective influencers. This research underscores the importance of a detailed method in assessing the qualities of influencers, pointing out that while social appeal, similarity of attitudes, and engagement levels are important, it's equally crucial to consider an influencer's perceived knowledge, genuineness and reliability as fundamental factors that contribute to building brand trust and achieving marketing effectiveness. Marketers are encouraged to harness relational trustworthiness by aligning influencers' attributes with followers' preferences, amplifying brand recognition. Brands should strive to create content with the values espoused by influencers, ensuring a seamless integration of branded messages. Additionally, the study offers insights for SMIs, emphasising the necessity of maintaining expertise and credibility to sustain their influence. The research demonstrates that HEI brands can effectively reach their target audience through influencers, leveraging consumers' trust in SMIs over corporations (Weinswig, 2016). This study affirms the applicability of such digital marketing strategies within the HEI and research sector, paving the way for innovative approaches in academic marketing. Therefore, the managerial implications of the research on influencer marketing in the context of higher education and research branding are multifaceted and provide several actionable insights for practitioners in the field. The study's findings suggest that the attributes of influencers, such as perceived trustworthiness and expertise, are critical in shaping consumer behaviour and engendering trust in HEIs and research brands. This has several implications for managers. Institutional leaders should strategically prioritise working with influencers who have a sizable following and are also regarded as having a high degree of expertise and integrity in marketing higher education. These attributes play a crucial role in fostering trust and assurance among prospective students and important stakeholders, which is essential in the field. Considering the negligible difference between the French and Canadian cohorts, one might infer that the construct of a global identity exerts a more pronounced effect than cultural distinctions.

Consequently, university administrators should consider the engagement of influencers who personify a global identity, thereby appealing to a more expansive demographic. The impact of a global identity on consumer perceptions is a factor that warrants recognition by university management. Influencers adept at resonating with this collective identity may prove more efficacious in transcending cultural

impediments and resonating with diverse audiences. The research also underscores the importance of attitudinal homophily and the role of interactive engagement. To fortify relationships and cultivate trust, it is incumbent upon university managers to endorse and facilitate influencers' meaningful interaction with their constituencies, particularly ensuring that the content promulgated by influencers is consistent with the university's foundational principles. University administrators must also ensure the sustained credibility and subject-matter expertise of influencers. Influencers can maintain their status by providing continuous education and training on the latest developments in the higher education landscape. In influencer marketing, managers need to formulate strategies centred on cultivating relational trust between the influencer, the institution, and the prospective audience, leveraging perceived values, including but not limited to expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness.

### Limitations and directions for future research

This study presents different limitations that should be considered. First, the research included a group of students from both public and private universities, without differentiating between those participating in online or on-campus courses. Future scholarly endeavors could benefit from a comparative analysis of student and institutional profiles, despite their operation within a competitive academic environment with nuanced strategic differentiations. Institutional typologies, whether public or private, online or on-campus, may harbour distinct corporate and managerial ethos, which could, in turn, influence the efficacy of SMIs. Second, the potential for divergent impacts of SMIs across varying environments—socioeconomic, political, technological, or corporate cultural landscapes—presents a fertile ground for academic inquiry. A methodological expansion to include qualitative, longitudinal, and contextual studies could yield richer insights into these dynamics. Pentina *et al.* (2013) highlighted the variability of marketing effects across cultural dimensions, prompting an investigative trajectory into the interplay between the cultural provenance of influencers and students—spanning European, American, and Asian backgrounds—and its bearing on marketing outcomes. Lastly, this research opens a promising avenue for exploring non-market sectors and could significantly enhance reflection, particularly in a cross-cultural context.

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## APPENDIX 1 The Vignettes

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Soyez certains que vous pouvez toujours finir dans un endroit formidable comme @NorthrideUniversity, établissement engagé à trouver l'extraordinaire en chacun. Bonne chance à tous en ce jour de résultats et souvenez-vous que vous finirez exactement là où vous devez être! 🎓🍷👉 ...more

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