

# The Mediating Role of Trustworthiness in Influencer Marketing of Food Products

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## Abstract

There has been a growing interest in the role of influencers in the marketing of products and services, in particular in the extent to which they can be trusted and can affect the behavior of consumers toward a particular product or service. This study focuses on this issue in the context of the food sector and one prominent social network sites, Instagram (IG). Specifically, it aims to (i) examine the relationships between interactivity, authenticity, trustworthiness, brand trust and willingness to buy food products from IG stores; and (ii) investigate the mediating effect of trustworthiness on the relationship between interactivity, authenticity, and brand trust in IG stores. Data was collected from 380 respondents, mostly young females, who are IG users in the Bangkok area. Descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling (SEM) were used to test the hypotheses. Findings indicate that while most of the respondents actively follow influencers on IG, they are not as active following specific IG stores. All proposed hypotheses were accepted except one as the direct effects of influencer interactivity and authenticity on brand trust in IG stores were found to be insignificant. It was also found that the relationship between influencer interactivity, authenticity, and brand trust in IG stores is fully mediated by the trustworthiness of followers in influencers.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Trustworthiness, Brand Trust, Authenticity, Social Media Influencer

## 1. Introduction

The use of social network sites (SNSs) or social media has been growing exponentially in the last decade. Broadly speaking, SNSs are web-based services allowing users to connect and share their profiles with so called “friends” and “followers” (Kananukul, Jung, & Watchravesringkan, 2015). In Thailand, the most favorite SNSs are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Line (Zhou & Price, 2020). Of great import here, SNSs have become an integral part of an organization’s marketing tools that assist in generating two-way communication (Kananukul et al., 2015; Paris, Lee, & Seery, 2010). While in the past, marketers would essentially rely on face-to-face communication amongst friends, family members, and co-workers and on such concepts as word-of-mouth (WOM) to communicate with consumers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), this traditional form of communication is being replaced by the fast-growing use of SNSs for marketing purpose (S. Zhou et al., 2020). Influencers, i.e., those who help to create a positive attitude towards a brand, are now a major source of WOMs. Moreover, whereas in the past, influencers were almost exclusively celebrities, such as athletes, musicians, actors and actresses, as well as other public figures, today, the exclusive use of celebrity endorsers in the form of TV and radio advertisements is perceived as associated with a traditional perspective on marketing and with the more traditional media (Guruge, 2018).

The growth of digital platforms allows ordinary people to express their views and thoughts freely. This is a fast-growing trend that is critical to marketing as these influencers are perceived to be authentic in their expressions (Guruge, 2018). The concept of social media influencer (SMI) have been receiving much attention lately in terms of being associated with

the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) for marketing strategies (e.g. Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). What characterizes SMIs is their attractiveness, credibility, and expertise, which are perceived as signs of authenticity and trustworthiness by consumers (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). That said, the use of SMIs can have either a positive or negative effect on brand image, depending on the eWOM content (S. Zhou et al., 2020). Obviously, if consumers perceived the eWOM content of SMIs to be authentic, then it is very likely that they will assign a positive image to the brand and vice versa when the content is perceived to be negative. Marketers will identify SMIs who have a direct impact on the target audiences as these SMIs can convince their audiences to purchase the related products via influencers' posts or reviews (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Influencers, whether ordinary people or celebrities, who present themselves and their contents on social media platforms, are at the core of this study. As the number of SMIs has increased recently (Social Media Influencer Marketing in Thailand, 2020), it is important to understand how consumers respond to SMIs. As K. Yang, Kim, and Tanoff (2020) have argued, one condition for IG users to respond to posts and reviews is for them to be certain that they can trust the content. Indeed, trust is an important antecedent leading to marketing responses such as a positive brand image (S. Zhou et al., 2020) and ultimately to the purchase of products (K. Yang et al., 2020). According to Jun and Yi (2020), consumers will trust SMIs if they interact with their followers and present themselves in an authentic manner.

Influencer marketing has been used in a variety of sectors that include health and fitness, fashion and beauty, food and high-technology products to name a few (De Veirman et al., 2017). Due to the coronavirus outbreak at the end of 2018 and the resultant surge in e-commerce worldwide, including in Thailand, influencer marketing is booming. Whilst many industries in Thailand, such as tourism, manufacturing, agriculture, exports, and retails have been heavily affected by substantial drops in their levels of activities, one sector that has been spared is the food industry. Indeed, it is one of the few industries that have experienced traffic growth and higher conversion growth since the outbreak of the pandemic (Hedin, 2020). This study focuses on this industry. The food sector in this study refers to the food and beverage industry and includes fresh food, cooked food, packaged food, and alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages. In sum, it considers any food products meant for human consumption.

One of the prominent SNSs that incorporates the use of SMIs is Instagram (IG). For consumers, the purpose of using IG is to follow brands and influencers in order to collect brand information and get influencers' activities updated (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2018). Criteria used to categorize SMIs include the size of the followers, e.g., micro vs. macro influencers (Voorveld, 2019), and social media platforms, e.g., bloggers, YouTubers, Instagrammers (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In light of these introductory remarks, this research thus intends to:

- (1) examine the relationships between interactivity, authenticity, trustworthiness, and brand trust in IG stores and consumers' willingness to buy food products from IG stores; and
- (2) investigate the mediating effect of trustworthiness on interactivity, authenticity, and brand trust.

The findings will provide some guidelines to marketers on the role that trustworthiness can play in influencer marketing and on how marketers can enhance the level of IG users' trust in IG stores to promote marketing responses.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Before hypothesis can be developed, it is necessary first to discuss the following key operative concepts; influencer marketing (including influencer interactivity and authenticity), behavioral intention, brand trust, and trustworthiness.

### - *Influencer Marketing*

Influencer marketing refers to the collaboration between businesses, brand owners, and entrepreneurs with social media influencers (SMIs) to promote product and brands (De Veirman et al., 2017). The purpose of using SMIs is two-fold; (i) to establish and maintain the relationship with followers; and (ii) to persuade followers and motivate them to react to the content posted or reviewed by SMIs (K. Yang et al., 2020). Followers' opinions can also be on these posts or reviews (De Veirman et al., 2017). Extant studies have explored various responses to influencer marketing, including behavioral intention toward the posts (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020), intention to purchase (Farivar, Wang, & Yuan, 2021; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020; K. Yang et al., 2020), brand trust (Jun & Yi, 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020), and loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020). However, due to the increasing use of SMIs and the possibility that followers will therefore respond to the posts and reviews selectively, it is vital to understand how followers choose to respond to influencer marketing. According to Jun and Yi (2020), two variables that generate brand trust are (i) influencer interactivity and (ii) authenticity.

(i) *Influencer interactivity* – can be defined as the way in which influencers and followers (audiences) can generate two-way communication on the influencer's social media platform in real time (Jun & Yi, 2020; McMillan & Hwang, 2002). The concept of influencer interactivity is derived from mechanical interactivity, which had been used in the past as a way to measure how active a company's website responds to customer's feedbacks (Lee & Park, 2013; McMillan & Hwang, 2002). Mechanical interactivity, however, is different from influencer interactivity since the perception that no human being is involved makes it rather intangible. Thus, influencer interactivity can be seen as an interpersonal communication between individuals (Jun & Yi, 2020). (ii) *Authenticity* – is generally defined as the degree of being genuine, real, and true to the claim made (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Similarly, influencer authenticity is the degree in which followers viewed the influencers to be sincere and true to the contents that they post (Jun & Yi, 2020). In other words, the contents posted by influencers should stem from their internal motivations rather than from the external influences of brands.

### - *Brand Trust*

In relationship marketing, the objectives are often focused on attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Under the commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) trust and commitment are the focal points among all other relational exchanges. Trust can be defined as “existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). In other words, trust is an individual's belief or confidence that an exchange between the parties will happen in a manner consistent with the expectations (Hajli et al., 2017). In the marketing context, brand trust is another important aspect of creating interactions as part of the consumer and business relationships that emphasizes how consumers believe that all attributes and benefits promised by the business will materialize (Kwon et al., 2020). Thus, brand trust can not only initiate but also assist in maintaining the buyer-seller relationship with a clear brand value and result in brand loyalty (Kwon et al., 2020), word of mouth intention (Jalilvand et al., 2017), and purchase intention (Hajli et al., 2017). When consumers believe and have confidence in influencers, the latter will be seen as trustworthy influencers (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020).

### ***- Behavioral Intention***

One of the paradigms used to explain how individuals maintain their psychological balance on their cognition - thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and intent - is the cognitive consistency theory (Ahn & Kwon, 2020). In a nutshell, the theory explains how an individual who has a positive attitude or belief toward a product will generally have higher behavioral intention to purchase or support that product. Behavioral intention has been defined as the degree to which a person perceives his/her willingness to buy the product or use the service (H. Yang, Yu, Zo, & Choi, 2016). Generally, behavioral intention is a reliable predictor of the actual usage behavior (Rahman et al., 2021). As a number of studies show, behavioral intention encapsulates such concepts as intention to recommend (Rahi & Abd. Ghani, 2019), intention to purchase (De Canio, Martinelli, & Endrighi, 2021), intention to revisit (Kusumawati et al., 2020), and willingness to buy (Beneke et al., 2013).

### ***- Trustworthiness***

Trustworthiness can be defined as the degree of confidence that the trustor has on the characteristics and traits of the trustee (Kosiba et al., 2018). Therefore, in order for influencers (trustees) to achieve trustworthiness, consumers (trustors) must be confident that the messages from influencers are believable. Since trustworthiness is a key attribute of influencer marketing, it is vital to understand its role. So far, we have considered the relationship between influencer interactivity and authenticity and their effect on trustworthiness and brand trust. However, according to the theory of trust transfer, the hypothesized relationship might actually be more complex as trust can be transferred from known individuals to unknown sources (Stewart, 2003; Wu, Chen, Chien, & Wu, 2016). In other words, followers might view influencers as trustworthy (known sources) but have no knowledge about IG store being endorsed. Under the theory of trust transfer, it is likely that followers will also trust IG store based on their trust in influencers. Konuk (2020) investigated the relationship between trust in a manufacturer brand and trust in the private brand label of a grocery store in Istanbul, Turkey, and found a significant positive relationship. Trust was transferred from the manufacturer brand to the private label brand. Another study of influencer marketing conducted by Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) in Germany also found a similar effect. The relationship between the trustworthiness of the influencer and brand trust was significantly positive. Previous studies, however, have not yet considered trustworthiness to have a mediating effect on influencer interactivity, authenticity, and brand trust. This study therefore attempts to investigate the role of trustworthiness as mediation on the relationship of influencer interactivity, authenticity, and brand trust in IG stores. Accordingly, based on the above discussion, this study hypothesizes the relationship between influencer interactivity, authenticity, trustworthiness, and brand trust in IG stores as follows:

**H1:** *Influencer interactivity and authenticity have a significant positive effect on brand trust in IG stores.*

**H2:** *Influencer interactivity and authenticity have a significant positive effect on trustworthiness.*

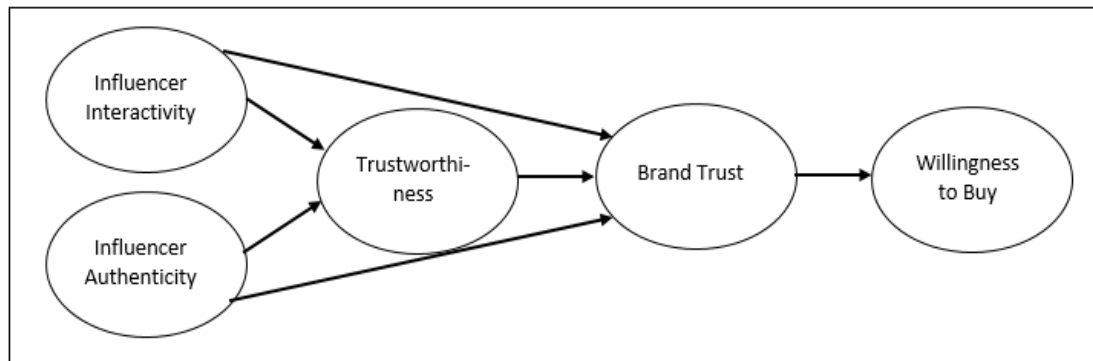
**H3:** *The relationship between influencer interactivity and authenticity and brand trust in IG stores is mediated by the degree of trustworthiness.*

According to various extant studies, implementing influencer marketing can have consequences on behavioral intention (Casaló et al., 2020), intention to purchase (Farivar et al., 2021; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020; K. Yang et al., 2020), brand trust (Jun & Yi, 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020) and loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020). A number of studies, though, have determined that it is brand trust that mostly influences consumer response to products and services. For instance, Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) looked at influencer marketing and found that for a customer to have a higher degree of intention to

purchase, he/she must trust the brand that he/she is considering. Similarly, Sembada and Koay (2019) investigated the effect of trust on purchase intention in the context of social media stores and found a positive relationship. In other words, if consumers want to shop on social media stores, they must believe that the stores are trustable. Accordingly, the following hypotheses can be developed.

**H4:** *Brand trust in IG stores will positively influence willingness to buy food products.*

Figure 1 shows the research conceptual model developed for this study that incorporates all the relationships hypothesized and reflects the aforementioned theoretical background underpinning them.



**Figure 1:** Research Conceptual Model

### 3. Research Methodology

The population used for this quantitative research study involves IG users in the Bangkok area (Greater Bangkok). To qualify for this research, the respondents must own an IG account. The sample size of this research was determined using G\*Power to analyze linear regression analysis with multiple predictors. The medium effect size (0.15) was entered with an error probability of 0.05 and power of 0.95 (1 - β error probability). Based on the four predictors used, the minimum number of samples was computed to be 129 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). The judgmental sampling technique was utilized to collect the questionnaires. The Google Form link was posted on the social media sites of the researcher (IG, Facebook, and Line). 380 valid responses were returned in total.

The measurement scale adopted for this study is based on extant research and measures five constructs. It includes 5 items related to interactivity, 3 items related to authenticity, 5 items related to trustworthiness, 4 items related to brand trust, and 3 items related to willingness to buy. All the scales used for this study were achieved for reliability test with Cronbach’s alpha of .70 as shown in Table 1 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was used for all the independent and dependent constructs.

**Table 1:** Measurements and Their Cronbach’s Alphas

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient (α)
Interactivity (Jun & Yi, 2020)	5	.93
Authenticity (Jun & Yi, 2020)	3	.82
Trustworthiness (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020)	5	.96
Brand Trust (Konuk, 2020)	4	.97
Willingness to Buy (Konuk, 2020)	3	.97

The statistical tools used to analyze reliability and validity in this study include Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and Pearson's correlation coefficient. To test the hypothesized relationships in this study, structural equations modelling (SEM) was employed. This is a technique commonly used to estimate the path analysis of independent and dependent variables. It allows all the hypothesis (H1-H4) to be estimated simultaneously instead of conducting separate multiple regressions (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). This eliminates measurement errors.

On the basis of the 380 valid questionnaires returned, a reliability analysis was performed. As can be seen in Table 2, the results of Cronbach's Alpha coefficients show that all the constructs achieved scores above .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). It was therefore concluded that all the scales used for this study were acceptable for further analysis.

**Table 2:** Reliability Analysis

Construct	Code	Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient ( $\alpha$ )
Interactivity	INT1	Interacting with the influencer whom I follow on IG is like having a real conversation	.833
	INT2	I perceive the Influencer whom I follow on IG to be sensitive to my needs for information	
	INT3	The influencer whom I follow on IG will respond to me quickly and efficiently	
	INT4	The influencer whom I follow on IG allows me to communicate directly with her/him	
	INT5	The influencer whom I follow on IG will talk back to me if I post a message	
Authenticity	AUT1	The influencer whom I follow on IG has a true passion for food products.	.856
	AUT2	The influencer whom I follow on IG wants to do his/her best providing his/her content about food products.	
	AUT3	The influencer whom I follow on IG is devoted to what he/she does on IG about food product content.	
Trustworthiness	TWN1	The influencer whom I follow on IG is dependable.	.902
	TWN2	The influencer whom I follow on IG is honest.	
	TWN3	The influencer whom I follow on IG is reliable.	
	TWN4	The influencer I follow on IG is sincere.	
	TWN5	The influencer I follow on IG is trustworthy.	
Brand Trust	TRUST1	I trust the IG store brand.	.897
	TRUST2	I rely on the IG store brand.	
	TRUST3	IG store is an honest brand.	
	TRUST4	The IG store brand is safe.	
Willingness to Buy	WTB1	I would consider buying food products via IG stores.	.867
	WTB2	I will purchase food products via IG stores	
	WTB3	There is a strong likelihood that I will buy food products from IG stores.	

#### 4. Research Findings

The demographic data collected from the 380 valid questionnaires indicate that 55 percent of the respondents were females aged between 18-22 years (56.3%). Most of them were students (72.6%), many with a monthly income below 15,000 THB (44.7%). 36.3 percent have an income between 15,001-30,000 THB. 80.0 percent of them either have obtained a bachelor's degree or are working on obtaining one. These respondents usually search food products via

social media, which, apart from IG, also includes Facebook (50.8%). The main food products they order via social media are sweet and chocolate (29.5%) and bakery (28.7%). The most frequent time when IG users order food is during the 20.00-24.00 slot (43.2%). Respondents use social media to order food for two main reasons: because it is very easy and convenient to use (40.7%) and less time is involved (28.1%). They typically visit their IG accounts more than five times a day (52.6%). Within their own IG accounts, most users follow more than 20 influencers (33.9%) but they typically follow less than five IG stores (41.8%). Most of the respondents often react to the posts on IG. 40.6 percent of them click ‘like the post’ and about 30.4 percent are interested on the posts but no further action is involved.

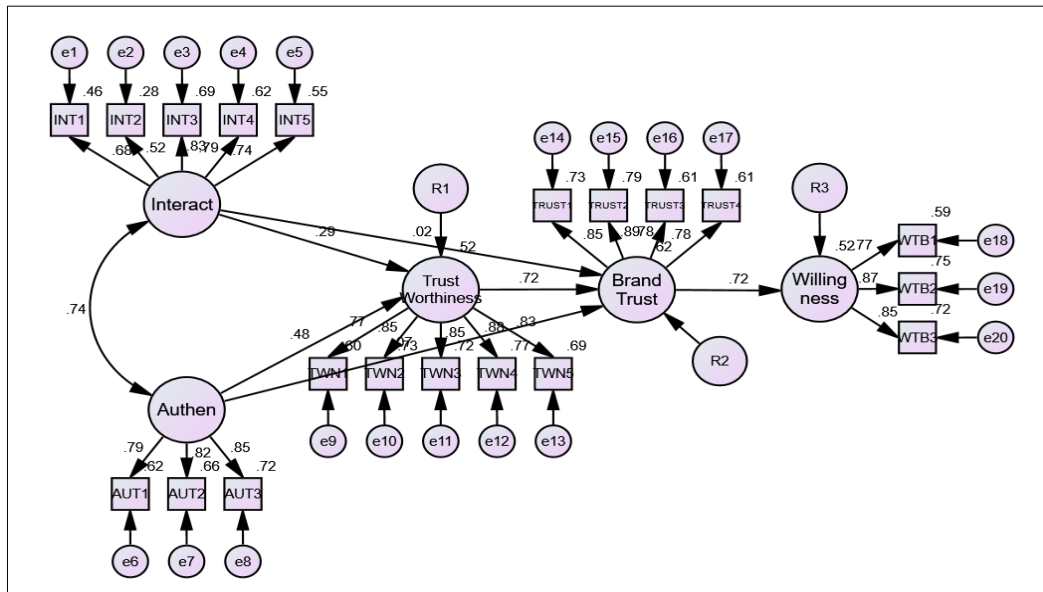
Prior to hypotheses testing, the Pearson’s correlation coefficient was computed to examine the construct validity and multi-collinearity. It was found that all independent variables (interactivity, authenticity, trustworthiness, and brand trust) are positively correlated to willingness to buy. However, as Table 3 shows, there is no substantial correlation between any of the predictors ( $R > .9$ ) (Field, 2005). Therefore, no multi-collinearity was found in any of the relationships.

**Table 3:** Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient

	<b>Interactivity</b>	<b>Authenticity</b>	<b>Trustworthiness</b>	<b>Brand Trust</b>	<b>Willingness</b>
Interactivity	1	.664**	.600**	.487**	.474**
Authenticity	.664**	1	.629**	.509**	.480**
Trustworthiness	.600**	.629**	1	.708**	.624**
Brand Trust	.487**	.509**	.708**	1	.624**
Willingness	.474**	.480**	.586**	.624**	1

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

In order to consider the model fit with a sample size above 250 and observed variables of 12-30, the model should report a significant p-value ( $p < .01$ ) (Hair et al., 2010). The normed chi-square (the ratio of chi-square and degree of freedom) is generally accepted if it falls within the ratio of 3:1 (Hair et al., 2010). As to the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), the general rule of thumb is that for a value to be acceptable it should be greater than .95 (Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Muller, 2003; Schreiber et al., 2006). However, values greater than .90 are considered to be a good model fit. In assessing ‘badness of fit’, the acceptable value of SRMR should fall below .08. The ‘comparative fit index’ (CFI) of .95 or higher is generally accepted as a rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2010). Alternatively, the ‘normed fit index’ (NFI) and ‘non-normed fit index’ (NNFI) or ‘Tucker-Lewis index’ (TLI) should also be reported. Values of .92 or higher would be considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2010). Accordingly, as shown in Figure 2, it was found that the fit of the model is acceptable ( $\chi^2 = 432.617$ ;  $DF = 163$  ( $p = 0.000$ );  $GFI = 0.901$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.066$ ;  $SRMR = 0.067$ ;  $NFI = 0.919$ ;  $TLI = 0.939$ ;  $CFI = 0.948$ ).



Notes: \*\* $p < .01$ ; GFI = 0.901; RMSEA = 0.066; SRMR = 0.067; NFI = 0.919; TLI = 0.939; CFI = 0.948;  $\chi^2 = 432.617$ ; DF = 163 ( $p = 0.000$ )

Figure 2: Full Model Results

The path analysis was then employed to test hypothesis

H1-H4 on the effects of interactivity, authenticity, trustworthiness, brand trust and willingness to buy. Table 4 shows the results of all these effects. Based on the structural equation model analysis, it can be seen that the effects of interactivity and authenticity on brand trust in IG stores (H1) were found to be insignificant. Therefore, both influencer interactivity and authenticity do not have a direct effect on brand trust in IG stores. As to hypotheses H2, which examines the effects of interactivity and authenticity on trustworthiness, it was found that the unstandardized coefficients of interactivity and authenticity are .291 ( $\beta = .287 p < .001$ ) and .414 ( $\beta = .481 p < .001$ ). This indicates that as one unit of interactivity and authenticity of influencers increases, trustworthiness will increase by .291 and .414 unit, respectively. It can therefore be concluded that influencer interactivity and authenticity have a positive effect on trustworthiness. Hypotheses H2 is accepted but, as indicated in Table 4, hypotheses H1 is rejected.

Table 4: Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypothesized path	Standardized Coefficients (β)	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Results
Interactivity → Brand Trust	.019	.020	H1: Rejected
Authenticity → Brand Trust	.067	.059	H1: Rejected
Interactivity → Trustworthiness	.287**	.291**	H2: Supported
Authenticity → Trustworthiness	.481**	.414**	H2: Supported
Interactivity → Trustworthiness → Brand Trust	.208**	.218**	H3: Supported
Authenticity → Trustworthiness → Brand Trust	.349**	.310**	H3: Supported
Brand Trust → Willingness to buy	.719**	.731**	H4: Supported

Notes:  $p < .05$



The indirect effects of interactivity and authenticity on trustworthiness of influencers were tested as well. As suggested by the unstandardized coefficients of .218 ( $\beta = .208 p < .001$ ) and .310 ( $\beta = .349 p < .001$ ), when influencer interactivity and authenticity increase by one unit, the effect of brand trust will also increase by .218 and .310 units, mediated by trustworthiness. Moreover, based on the above finding that indicates insignificant direct effects of interactivity and authenticity on brand trust, it can be concluded that the effects of interactivity and authenticity on brand trust in IG stores is fully mediated by influencer trustworthiness. Therefore, hypotheses H3 is accepted.

As to hypotheses H4, which tests the effect of brand trust in IG stores on willingness to buy food products, it was found that with a standardized coefficient of .731 ( $\beta = .719 p < .001$ ), brand trust in IG stores has an effect on willingness to buy food products. This indicates that as one unit of brand trust increases, willingness to buy food products from IG stores will increase by .731 unit. Thus, brand trust has a positive influence on willingness to buy food from IG stores. Hypotheses H4 is accepted.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the effects of influencer interactivity and authenticity on both influencer trustworthiness and brand trust in IG stores. As we saw earlier, brand trust refers to the belief that the content or the information provided by influencers are sincere. In other words, brand trust is based on the belief that influencers are honest and sincere and can be trusted. To verify the hypothesis developed for this study, 380 respondents answered a questionnaire based on Jun and Yi's (2020) research study. Most of them were females between 18 and 22 years old. This is in keeping with statistics of IG users in Thailand, which indicate that most of the users are females aged between 25-34 and 18-24 years old, respectively (NapoleonCat, 2021). Since the demographic profiles of the respondents in this study are similar in terms of age and gender to the age and gender distribution reported in statistics on IG users in Thailand, it can therefore be assumed that the respondents in this study are good representatives of IG users in Thailand. This is an important aspect to emphasize as it lends credence to the findings of this study and makes them reliable and usable by stakeholders in influencer marketing.

Since this study also found that IG users tend to follow influencers on their accounts rather than directly check IG stores, it is more efficient for marketers to seek endorsement of IG store brand via influencers. Any influencers' marketing communication to IG users is therefore preferable to direct communication from IG stores as influencers have a higher exposure rate. Clearly, they can help to create a positive attitude towards a brand in ways IG stores' direct communication with consumers cannot, as they have become a major source for WOMs. Thus, as more influencers present their views and thoughts 'freely' to potential consumers, the more likely it is for brand trust in IG stores to develop. Naturally, it is critical that in their interaction with followers they be perceived to be authentic in their expressions (Guruge, 2018). Since, as we saw in the introduction to this article, they generally are ordinary people (as opposed to celebrities, associated with more traditional media), they are more likely to present themselves in an authentic manner.

Even though, as hypotheses testing shows (H1), the effects of influencers' interactivity and authenticity on brand trust in IG stores were not found to be significant, which suggests that there is no direct relationship, this does not undermine the key role influencers play in today's digital marketing. For one, this study's finding that IG users may not necessarily trust IG stores even when influencers attempt to engage and interact with followers as part of sharing their authentic food products content is inconsistent with a number of previous studies (e.g. Jun & Yi, 2020; K. Yang et al., 2020). In these studies, influencers' interactivity and authenticity were

determined to have no mediating effect on trustworthiness. Moreover, the fact that the respondents in this study must view influencer as being trustworthy as an initial step before they can develop brand trust in IG stores is not outcome determinative. They may eventually trust the brand as they perceive influencers can be trusted and are authentic. According to the theory of trust transfer (Stewart, 2003; Wu et al., 2016), trust in known sources will lead to trust in unknown sources. As applied to this study, this means that, if this theory holds true, trust in influencers will translate into brand trust in IG stores as well. In this study, there is simply no similar direct causal relationship as trustworthiness fully mediates this relationship and fail to provide the necessary linkage. This shows the importance for companies to use trustworthy influencers to build brand trust and develop behavioral intention. As underlined in Ahn and Kwon's (2020) cognitive consistency theory and as emphasized by Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020), trust will lead to intention to purchase. This is similar to the finding of this study that trust in IG stores will increase the degree of willingness to buy food product from IG stores.

#### *- Future Research and Limitations*

This research attempted to highlight the fact that influencers are the key to positive consumer responses. The assumption is that consumers are much less likely to purchase a particular brand of food products if they do not have any knowledge of that brand. As we saw in this study, today, it is primarily the role of influencers to create brand trust in a product or a brand. This is generally achieved by ensuring that influencers are trustworthy and can therefore be trusted. However, trustworthiness may not arise instantly. Consistent authentic interaction with followers should therefore be explored in depth as it could be one the keys toward gaining the trust of consumers.

This study proposed to test the mediator role of trustworthiness in social influencer marketing with a sole focus on IG users, which of course meant that users from other social media platforms were excluded from this study. Future research should therefore replicate this research model and seek out the role of trustworthiness on other social media platforms. Moreover, this research model could be generalized to other food businesses in order to expand the exploration of the effect of social media influencers to an entire industry. This would make it possible to determine if the findings related to one brand can be generalized to many brands. Another limitation of this research, apart from focusing on one specific brand, is that the responders fail to represent every generation as the questionnaires were mainly collected from Generations Y and Z. Yet, there may be generational issues and behaviors that could possibly lead to a different conclusion. Future research on this topic might therefore consider focusing on Generation X to investigate if similar effects exist.

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