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# **When the Match is Right: How Influencer–Brand–Follower Congruence Drives Travel Purchase Behavior**

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# **When the Match is Right: How Influencer–Brand–Follower Congruence Drives Travel Purchase Behavior**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study examines how travel influencers' congruence with endorsed travel brands and alignment with their followers affect travel purchase behavior, addressing a critical gap in tourism marketing literature.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A novel conceptual framework grounded in the source credibility model and the persuasion knowledge model is proposed. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 374 Sri Lankan travelers who actively engage with travel-related content on Instagram. The hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling.

**Findings:** Travel influencers who are perceived as trustworthy, attractive, and congruent with both the endorsed travel brand and their audience enhance perceived authenticity. This perceived authenticity positively influences attitudes toward the travel brand, which in turn drives travel purchase behavior.

**Originality/value:** This study frames perceived influencer authenticity as a process-based mediator critical to the recognition of native advertising. Leveraging Sri Lanka's emerging tourism context as a boundary condition, it demonstrates how authenticity mediates influencer–brand and influencer–follower congruence and provides actionable insights for designing credible, trust-enhancing, and effective tourism promotion strategies.

**Keywords:** *Travel influencers, perceived authenticity, influencer-brand congruence, tourism marketing, purchase intentions*

## 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally reshaped the consumer decision-making process (Al Kurdi & Alshurideh, 2025), including how travelers search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchase decisions (Fletcher & Gbadamosi, 2024; Chen & Wei, 2024). Within the tourism domain, social media platforms have become central to travel planning, as tourists increasingly rely on user-generated and influencer-created content to reduce uncertainty and enhance confidence in decision-making (Ghaderi et al., 2024; Saini et al., 2025). Against growing skepticism toward conventional celebrity endorsements, social media influencers have emerged as salient opinion leaders whose content is perceived as more relatable, sincere, and authentic than traditional advertising messages (Han & Chen, 2022; Saini et al., 2023; Babu & Philip, 2025). Consequently, tourism and travel firms have intensified their use of influencer marketing strategies, positioning perceived authenticity as a key driver of trust, favorable brand attitudes, and purchase intentions.

In practice, most influencer marketing activities take the form of native advertising, wherein promotional messages are seamlessly embedded within influencers' lifestyle narratives (Lee et al., 2022). Instagram has emerged as the dominant platform for such campaigns due to its visual storytelling affordances and high engagement levels (Smith, 2021; Tešin et al., 2022). Influencers frequently collaborate with travel brands to create posts, stories, and reels that closely resemble everyday personal experiences, thereby blurring the boundary between organic self-expression and commercial promotion (Kilipiri et al., 2023). Although sponsorship disclosures (e.g., "*paid partnership*") are typically present, they are often subtle and easily overlooked, leading audiences to interpret such content as genuine recommendations rather than paid endorsements (Beichert et al., 2024; Jánská et al., 2024; Looi & Kahlor, 2024). This

ambiguity creates a persuasion paradox in which authenticity becomes both a strategic necessity and a potential vulnerability.

Research grounded in the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) suggests that when consumers recognize the persuasive intent underlying influencer content, they activate skepticism, which can weaken message effectiveness by reducing perceived authenticity and trust (Cheung et al., 2022; Hudders et al., 2021). While perceived authenticity is well established in marketing and tourism literature (Roth-Cohen et al., 2025), prior studies have largely conceptualized it as a direct outcome of influencer-generated content (Campagna et al., 2023). Its role as a mediating construct, particularly under conditions of recognized native advertising, remains empirically underexplored, especially within tourism contexts (Shin et al., 2025). Existing research has predominantly focused on overt or disclosure-based influencer marketing, offering limited insight into how authenticity functions when commercial intent is known, yet endorsement narratives retain an appearance of organicity (Shin et al., 2025; Taylor et al., 2024). As a result, the mechanisms through which persuasion knowledge is resolved—rather than merely activated—remain insufficiently understood.

Influencer effectiveness is further contingent upon perceived congruence (Koay & Lim, 2025). Influencer–brand congruence reflects the alignment between an influencer’s persona and a brand’s image, whereas influencer–follower congruence captures perceived similarity in values, lifestyle, and identity between influencers and their audiences (Belanche et al., 2021; Hudders & Lou, 2023; Venciute et al., 2023). Both forms of congruence have been shown to enhance trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention (Kim & Kim, 2021; Dhun & Dangi, 2023). However, tourism marketing research has paid limited attention to how these distinct forms of congruence jointly shape behavioural outcomes through perceived authenticity, particularly

when audiences are aware of persuasive intent (Lin & Rasoolimanesh, 2024; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Recent scholarly calls emphasize the need for process-oriented investigations that explicate how congruence translates into persuasion through authenticity, rather than assuming direct, linear effects (Bastrygina et al., 2024; Xie-Carson et al., 2024).

Addressing these gaps, the present study examines perceived influencer authenticity as a mediating construct linking influencer–brand congruence and influencer–follower congruence to travelers’ brand attitude and purchase intention within the context of recognized native advertising. By empirically testing authenticity as an explanatory process rather than a surface-level attribute, the study extends tourism influencer marketing research beyond disclosure effects and direct persuasion models. Accordingly, the study pursues the following research objectives:

1. To examine the effects of influencer–brand congruence and influencer–follower congruence on travellers’ brand attitude and purchase intention in the context of recognised native advertising.
2. To investigate the mediating role of perceived influencer authenticity in the relationships between congruence (influencer–brand and influencer–follower) and travellers’ behavioural outcomes.

Integrating the Source Credibility Model (Ohanian, 1990) with the PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994), this study offers a process-oriented and context-sensitive explanation of how congruence among travel influencers, brands, and followers jointly shapes travel purchase behaviour. Perceived authenticity is conceptualized as the mechanism through which congruence effects operate under conditions of recognized persuasion, thereby extending prior research that has largely examined authenticity and congruence in isolation.

Sri Lanka offers a theoretically rich and empirically informative context, serving as an integral part of the study's explanatory framework rather than merely a neutral backdrop. As an emerging tourism destination navigating post-crisis recovery, Sri Lanka has witnessed a surge in social media adoption (Hewapathirana, 2025). This digital transformation positions online presence as a crucial tool for reconstructing the country's destination image and stimulating tourism demand (Sarangan et al., 2025). By late 2025, there were approximately 9 million active social media users (38.7% of the population) and about 2.25 million Instagram users, highlighting a substantial and increasingly influential digitally engaged traveler base (Hewapathirana, 2025). As a result, travel and tourism firms place significant emphasis on influencer-led promotion, leveraging the perceived credibility of peer-like digital endorsements and the powerful effect of positive influencer-driven word-of-mouth.

Influencer marketing practices and audience responses in Sri Lanka are shaped by unique socio-cultural, regulatory, and market factors (Gamage & Ashill, 2023). The country's collectivist culture, emphasis on relational trust, and dense interpersonal networks amplify sensitivity to authenticity, value alignment, and perceived sincerity, especially when commercial motives are apparent (Pathirana & Vimukthika, 2024). Meanwhile, disclosure norms and regulatory frameworks are still developing, resulting in an environment where covert or ambiguously disclosed advertising is prevalent and not consistently viewed as deceptive. These dynamics render authenticity judgments more delicate and significant than in highly regulated Western markets, offering a valuable context to explore how perceived authenticity mediates the impact of recognized persuasion on influencer effectiveness (Campagna et al., 2023; Shin et al., 2025).

By embedding Sri Lanka's contextual characteristics into the research design and analysis, this study makes three interrelated contributions that integrate theory, context, and practice. First, it reconceptualizes perceived influencer authenticity as a dynamic, process-based mediator essential to understanding persuasion in recognized native advertising. This approach shows that authenticity decisively shapes whether persuasion succeeds or fails, rather than being a static outcome. Second, it formalizes contextual boundary conditions by leveraging Sri Lanka's emerging tourism market, where collectivist culture, relational trust norms, emergent disclosure practices, and post-crisis recovery dynamics make authenticity judgments more fragile yet consequential, allowing the study to articulate generalizable propositions about when and why authenticity mediates the effects of influencer-brand and influencer-follower congruence, thereby extending influencer marketing literature beyond mature Western markets. Third, it offers practice-oriented insights, identifying covert influencer advertising as a destination-level risk factor, illustrating how authenticity functions as a trust-restoration mechanism in crisis-sensitive tourism markets, and providing actionable guidance for destination marketing organisations, policymakers, and tourism regulators in digitally expanding, culturally collectivist, and post-crisis destinations.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the relevant literature is reviewed, and the conceptual framework and hypotheses are developed. Next, the research methodology is described, followed by the presentation of findings. The results are then discussed in relation to existing literature, and the paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Influencer Marketing and Instagram Influencers

Influencer marketing remains a conceptually evolving domain grounded in multiple theoretical traditions rather than a single unified definition (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Broadly, it refers to strategic collaborations in which brands partner with individuals who possess substantial online followings and symbolic credibility to promote products or services through personalized, narrative-driven content (Lou et al., 2023). Social media platforms provide the technological infrastructure that enables visibility, audience interaction, and monetization, thereby creating a mutually reinforcing ecosystem in which influencers, brands, and platforms co-produce engagement and commercial value (Casaló et al., 2023).

Early influencer marketing research drew heavily from celebrity endorsement theory; however, this analogy is increasingly insufficient (Hudders & Lou, 2023). Unlike celebrities whose authority is institutionally derived, influencers construct persuasive power through perceived relatability, lifestyle curation, and domain-specific expertise (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). Their influence is therefore less a function of fame and more a function of *perceived proximity and authenticity* (Gamage & Ashill, 2023). This distinction has shifted scholarly attention toward relational constructs, particularly parasocial relationships (PSRs)—one-sided emotional bonds formed through repeated mediated exposure.

Empirical studies consistently show that PSRs strengthen trust, intimacy, and receptivity to influencer messaging (Ballantine & Ozanne, 2022; Tukachinsky, 2023). Yet PSR-based explanations are often limited to demonstrating *that* relational closeness enhances persuasion, without clarifying *how* persuasion persists when commercial intent becomes visible. In covert or native advertising contexts, PSRs alone do not explain why some endorsements retain persuasive

power while others trigger skepticism and resistance. The prevailing assumption that relational attachment directly translates into compliance overlooks the cognitive dissonance that arises when followers simultaneously recognize commercial motives and maintain emotional affinity (Ghaderi et al., 2024). This unresolved tension suggests that authenticity cannot be treated merely as a correlated outcome of PSRs, but must instead be theorized as a mediating process through which consumers reconcile relational trust with persuasion awareness.

Instagram intensifies this dynamic because of its visual storytelling affordances, algorithmic amplification, and seamless integration of sponsorship formats (Conde & Casais, 2023). As sponsorship disclosures and native advertising practices proliferate, skepticism toward influencer content has grown alongside ethical concerns regarding transparency and covert persuasion (Abidin & Ots, 2024; Boerman & Müller, 2023). While prior research acknowledges that authenticity influences effectiveness (Conde & Casais, 2023), it often treats authenticity as an evaluative endpoint rather than a mechanism that explains why persuasion succeeds or fails under conditions of recognized commercial intent. The present study reframes authenticity accordingly, positioning it as the psychological bridge between relational attachment and persuasion outcomes rather than a descriptive attribute of influencer identity.

## *2.2 Source Credibility Model*

The source credibility model posits that persuasion effectiveness depends on the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of the communicator (Ohanian, 1990; Hovland et al., 1953; McGuire, 1985). Extensive empirical evidence confirms that credible sources positively influence brand attitudes and behavioral intentions (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Within influencer marketing, this model has been expanded to incorporate social

similarity, self-presentation style, and authenticity as supplementary dimensions (Dhun & Dangi, 2023; Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021).

However, treating authenticity as an additional credibility attribute risks diluting its conceptual meaning. When persuasion knowledge is activated—such as when sponsorship is disclosed—traditional credibility dimensions alone do not fully account for consumer reactions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Trustworthiness or attractiveness may remain high, yet persuasion may still weaken if perceptions of authenticity deteriorate (Manthiou et al., 2024). This pattern indicates that authenticity is not simply another trait within the credibility constellation but a theoretical necessity that explains how credibility cues are cognitively integrated once commercial intent is recognized. In other words, credibility dimensions signal potential sincerity, but authenticity determines whether those signals are interpreted as genuine or strategically constructed.

Accordingly, this study adopts the source credibility model not as an additive framework but as a process-oriented extension in which perceived influencer authenticity functions as a mediating construct shaped by congruence and credibility cues. This reframing shifts the emphasis from static trait evaluation to dynamic interpretation, clarifying how credibility is translated into persuasion under native advertising conditions rather than assuming linear effects.

### *2.3 Persuasion Knowledge Model*

The PKM explains how consumers interpret and respond to persuasive attempts once commercial intent is recognized (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Activation of persuasion knowledge often leads to coping responses such as skepticism, resistance, or message discounting (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). Yet these responses are neither uniform nor inevitable; they are moderated by

relational and interpretive factors, including PSRs and perceived authenticity (Borchers et al., 2022; Muravskii et al., 2022).

PKM distinguishes topic knowledge, agent knowledge, and persuasion knowledge (Ham & Nelson, 2019), providing a useful structure for analyzing influencer marketing. Native advertising strategies frequently delay full persuasion knowledge activation through narrative embedding, thereby preserving engagement and reducing immediate resistance (Childers et al., 2019; Venciute et al., 2023). Conversely, explicit disclosures heighten awareness and may diminish trust and authenticity, particularly among digitally literate audiences (Hudders et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2022). Existing research often examines PSRs, congruence, or disclosure effects in isolation, implicitly assuming additive influence. What remains unresolved is how these constructs interact when persuasion knowledge is simultaneously activated and relational attachment persists.

In the tourism domain specifically, PKM remains comparatively underutilized (Berber, 2024; Tan et al., 2025). More critically, prior studies tend to treat authenticity either as a moderator or as an outcome rather than as a mediating interpretive mechanism linking persuasion awareness to behavioral response. This fragmentation obscures the process through which consumers negotiate skepticism and trust in sponsored tourism narratives. The present study addresses this gap by integrating PKM with PSRs and congruence through the mediating role of perceived authenticity, thereby clarifying the mechanism that prior tourism influencer research leaves theoretically underspecified.

#### *2.4 Theoretical Positioning of the Present Study*

By integrating the source credibility model and the PKM, this study positions influencer–follower congruence as a driver of parasocial affinity and persuasion knowledge, influencer–brand congruence as reflecting topic-knowledge, and influencer traits as elements of agent knowledge. Perceived authenticity is identified as a key mediating construct, linking these forms of congruence to travelers’ brand attitudes and purchase intentions within the context of recognized native advertising. This integrated framework merges the source credibility model, PKM, and PSR theory, providing a cross-disciplinary, process-oriented perspective on influencer persuasion in tourism contexts.

### **3. Research Model and Hypotheses Development**

#### *3.1 Travel influencer’s characteristics and perceived authenticity*

In influencer marketing, perceived authenticity is a vital concept that links influencer attributes to persuasive effectiveness. As specified in the source credibility model, persuasive impact depends on the extent to which an endorser is perceived as attractive, trustworthy, and expert (Ohanian, 1990). For influencers, these qualities are relationally constructed and socially reinforced through ongoing PSRs, narrative self-presentation, and perceived similarity (Casaló et al., 2023; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Unlike conventional celebrity endorsements, influencer persuasion typically unfolds through native advertising, with overt advertising cues often limited or absent. In such contexts, perceived authenticity becomes a vital mediator, translating source characteristics into trust and persuasive influence (Audrezet et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2023).

In travel marketing specifically, authenticity holds heightened importance because travel decisions are experiential, emotional, and high-involvement, leading travelers to seek

information that appears genuine and experientially grounded (Campagna et al., 2023; Manthiou et al., 2024). Instagram travel influencers construct persuasive narratives through visual storytelling and personal disclosures that simulate first-hand travel experiences, enabling followers to perceive recommendations as organic rather than commercial (Deb et al., 2024). However, the growing prevalence of undisclosed sponsorships and overt commercialization has increased traveler skepticism, making authenticity more fragile and decisive for persuasion effectiveness (Hudders et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2025).

Within the source credibility model, attractiveness enhances persuasion not only through physical appeal but also via perceived charisma, relatability, lifestyle aspiration, and symbolic similarity (Vrontis et al., 2021). In the tourism context, attractiveness encompasses traits such as adventurousness, alignment with an aspirational lifestyle, and the capacity to visually embody desirable travel experiences (Manthiou et al., 2024). Empirical research demonstrates that attractive influencers benefit from a positivity bias, whereby audiences are more likely to attribute sincerity and credibility to appealing communicators—even in covert promotional settings (Băltescu & Untaru, 2025). Because influencer-sponsored posts are frequently framed as experiential narratives rather than explicit advertisements, followers may perceive attractive influencers' endorsements as authentic travel recommendations rather than as financially motivated promotions (Guo et al., 2024). Consequently, attractiveness supports the maintenance of perceived authenticity, even within ethically ambiguous promotional contexts. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H1: A travel influencer's perceived attractiveness will positively influence their perceived authenticity when covertly promoting tourism-related products or destinations on social media.

Trustworthiness—defined as the extent to which an endorser is believed to communicate honestly and without ulterior motives (Ohanian, 1990)—is fundamental to influencer persuasion. PSRs reinforce this effect by fostering emotional intimacy and perceived relational closeness, which amplify assumptions of sincerity and benevolent intent (Tukachinsky, 2023; Venciute et al., 2023). In tourism contexts, where followers rely heavily on influencers as experience proxies, trust reduces uncertainty and enhances acceptance of persuasive content (Manthiou et al., 2024).

From the PSK perspective, covert advertising delays or reduces the activation of persuasion knowledge, especially when followers have strong relational trust in influencers (Childers et al., 2019; Muravskii et al., 2022). Elevated trust reduces scepticism about sponsorship disclosures and increases the likelihood that endorsements are perceived as genuine experiences rather than manipulative promotions (Hudders et al., 2021). Thus, trustworthiness directly enhances perceived authenticity when commercial intent is concealed. On this basis, it is hypothesized that:

H2: A travel influencer's perceived trustworthiness will positively influence their perceived authenticity when covertly promoting tourism-related products or destinations on social media.

Expertise reflects the degree to which an influencer is perceived to possess relevant knowledge, experience, or skill to offer credible recommendations (Van der Waldt et al., 2009). In travel influencer marketing, expertise is demonstrated through repeated exposure to destinations, cultural knowledge, competence in itinerary planning, and experiential depth (Guo et al., 2024). Consistent with both the source credibility model and PKM, expert endorsers are more

persuasive because their recommendations are evaluated as informative rather than promotional (Ham & Nelson, 2019).

Even in sponsored contexts, detailed experiential narratives and expert guidance enable followers to view influencer posts as genuine travel advice rather than mere paid endorsements, helping to preserve perceived influencer authenticity (Hudders & Lou, 2023). Demonstrated expertise can further mitigate persuasion awareness, as travelers tend to trust credible sources rather than suspecting strategic manipulation (Cheung et al., 2022). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: A travel influencer's perceived expertise will positively influence their perceived authenticity when covertly promoting tourism-related products or destinations on social media.

### *3.2 Travel influencer-brand congruence, perceived authenticity, and brand attitude*

Influencer-brand congruence refers to the perceived alignment between an influencer's persona, lifestyle, and values and the image of the promoted brand (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Grounded in the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) and integrated with PKM's topic-knowledge dimension, congruence signals coherence between influencer identity and brand symbolism, facilitating message acceptance (Moulard et al., 2023).

In tourism contexts, where narrative consistency and experiential coherence are paramount, incongruent partnerships lead to heightened persuasion knowledge and foster skepticism, ultimately diminishing perceived influencer authenticity (Manthiou et al., 2024). Conversely, when sponsorships align seamlessly with an influencer's established travel identity, audiences are more likely to view endorsements as authentic reflections of the influencer's genuine travel preferences (Băltescu & Untaru, 2025). Such perceived congruence not only

reinforces influencer's perceived authenticity but also helps to mitigate ethical concerns associated with undisclosed commercial intent. This reasoning underpins the following hypothesis.

H4: Travel influencer-brand congruence will positively influence the perceived authenticity of the influencer when covertly promoting tourism-related products or destinations on social media.

Congruence between travel influencers and tourism brands is fundamental for shaping travelers' brand evaluations. According to the match-up hypothesis, endorsement effectiveness is maximized when an influencer's image, expertise, lifestyle, and values align with the brand's symbolic meaning or functional attributes, thereby enhancing source credibility and facilitating the transfer of positive associations to the brand (Belanche et al., 2021). Perceived fit reduces skepticism toward persuasive intent, increases cognitive fluency, and promotes favorable affective processing of brand messages, thereby leading to more positive brand attitudes. Congruent influencer-brand pairings are thus evaluated more holistically with less critical scrutiny, strengthening attitudinal responses.

While this mechanism is well established in explicit advertising settings, it remains underexplored within covert tourism marketing. In the absence of sponsorship disclosures, followers rely heavily on heuristic cues—such as lifestyle alignment, narrative coherence, and experiential authenticity—to evaluate message credibility (Gamage & Ashill, 2023). When influencer content aligns naturally with the promoted travel brand, narrative consistency enhances parasocial trust and diminishes perceptions of commercial manipulation, making brand placements appear organic rather than strategic (Guo et al., 2024). Relational identification further amplifies these effects, as followers vicariously project influencer preferences onto their

own aspirations, stimulating positive brand affect. Accordingly, influencer–brand congruence is expected to directly enhance brand attitudes through credibility transfer, narrative integration, and PSRs.

H5: Travel influencer-brand congruence will positively influence brand attitude toward covertly promoted tourism-related brands on social media.

### *3.3 Perceived authenticity, brand attitude, and purchase behaviour*

Perceived authenticity has emerged as a critical determinant underlying influencer effectiveness, particularly within high-involvement, experiential consumption contexts such as tourism, where consumers rely heavily on symbolic meaning and vicarious experience (Campagna et al., 2023). Authentic influencers are perceived as genuine, sincere, and autonomous communicators, which reduces consumer persuasion resistance, enhances message credibility, and fosters trust-based behaviour change (Kim & Song, 2020; Loebnitz & Grunert, 2022). In covert promotional environments, where commercial persuasion is embedded within personal travel narratives and persuasive intent is not entirely salient, authenticity assumes heightened significance because followers are more likely to interpret influencer content as experiential guidance rather than advertising (Manthiou et al., 2024). This perception limits the activation of persuasion knowledge, mitigates skepticism, and preserves relational trust. Consequently, perceived authenticity indirectly facilitates purchase behavior by strengthening influencer credibility and increasing receptivity toward recommended destinations, accommodations, and tourism services. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H6: The perceived authenticity of a travel influencer will positively influence travel-related purchase behavior when tourism brands are covertly promoted on social media.

Brand attitudes play a vital mediating role in translating influencer persuasion into concrete behavioral responses. Favorable brand attitudes formed through influencer endorsements have been consistently shown to predict both purchase intention and actual purchase decision across digital marketing contexts, including tourism (Campagna et al., 2023; Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). In covert influencer marketing—where commercial motives are woven into experiential storytelling and explicit disclosures are often absent—positive brand attitudes are primarily shaped by narrative congruence and perceived authenticity. When influencer content aligns with followers’ expectations and maintains an experiential tone, audiences perceive persuasive messages as credible and personally meaningful rather than as overt advertising (Boukis et al., 2025). Authentic influencer portrayals boost emotional brand evaluations, reinforce consumer–brand bonds, and reduce skepticism arising from implicit persuasion, thereby ultimately driving purchase behavior. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: A positive brand attitude toward a tourism brand covertly promoted by a travel influencer will positively influence travel-related purchase behavior.

#### *3.4 Moderating effect of travel influencer-follower congruence*

Influencer–follower congruence refers to the perceived alignment between an influencer and their followers in terms of values, lifestyle aspirations, beliefs, and identity orientations (Ju & Lou, 2022). Grounded in parasocial interaction theory, self-congruity theory, and social identity frameworks, this construct explains why audiences are more receptive to influencers who reflect their actual or ideal selves (Shan et al., 2020). When followers perceive substantial similarity with an influencer, they experience heightened relational closeness, emotional attachment, and perceived interpersonal connection, which strengthens parasocial bonds and increases

psychological identification with the influencer. This perceived alignment enhances message resonance, as influencer communications are interpreted as self-relevant rather than externally imposed or purely commercial.

From the perspective of the PKM, influencer–follower congruence plays a crucial moderating role by dampening defensive consumer responses to persuasive attempts. High congruence reduces the salience of persuasion knowledge by lowering scepticism and resistance, as followers who identify with influencers are more likely to infer benevolent intent and sincerity rather than strategic manipulation (Bastrygina et al., 2024). This buffering effect is particularly pronounced in covert advertising environments where commercial cues are minimised or obscured. Under such conditions, relational trust and perceived similarity substitute for transparency signals typically used to evaluate persuasion credibility.

Consequently, influencer–follower congruence is theorised to amplify the impact of credibility dimensions, particularly expertise and trustworthiness, on perceived authenticity. When congruence is strong, these source characteristics are more effectively translated into judgments of authenticity, thereby reinforcing the influencer’s persuasive power even as consumer awareness of influencer marketing tactics increases.

H8a: Travel influencer-follower congruence will moderate the relationship between the influencer’s perceived expertise and their perceived authenticity when covertly promoting tourism-related products or destinations on social media.

H8b: Travel influencer-follower congruence will moderate the relationship between the influencer’s perceived trustworthiness and their perceived authenticity when covertly promoting tourism-related products or destinations on social media.

## **4. Methodology**

### *4.1 Data collection and sample selection*

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to empirically test the proposed model among Sri Lankan travelers who actively engage with travel-related content on Instagram. Sri Lanka was selected due to the growing prominence of influencer marketing in the tourism sector and the limited scholarly attention to how influencer-created content affects travelers' behavior in this context (Gamage & Ashill, 2023; Hewapathirana, 2023; Boukis et al., 2025). A recent systematic review by Hudders and Lou (2023) further highlights the need for research in emerging geographical markets.

Due to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for covert influencer marketing, participants were recruited using purposive and convenience sampling. A single, high-profile Sri Lankan travel influencer was selected based on pre-defined criteria: (1) substantial follower engagement and visibility in the tourism influencer ecosystem, (2) no strong pre-existing exclusive brand partnerships to minimize confounding effects, and (3) content style representative of native advertising on Instagram. At data collection, the influencer had approximately 104,000 followers, indicating strong platform credibility. While this targeted selection facilitated access to a relevant and engaged sample, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings, a limitation discussed later.

Instagram was chosen as the platform due to its dominance in visual-based travel marketing. To simulate authentic exposure, standardized Instagram mock-ups were professionally created by adapting real influencer posts. Visual composition, caption length, posting format, and hashtags were controlled to ensure uniformity while maintaining realism. Stimuli were pre-tested with 10 participants to assess perceived authenticity and clarity, and

minor adjustments were made. Randomized presentation reduced order effects and response bias, while procedural remedies—including anonymity, standardized instructions, and item randomization—helped mitigate common method bias (CMB).

The survey was administered online from 1–7 December 2023. The survey link was disseminated via the influencer’s Instagram account’s “*swipe-up*” feature, reaching both the influencer’s followers and other active Instagram users. Eligibility criteria included Sri Lankan residency, age  $\geq 18$ , and prior engagement with travel influencer content. Of 441 submissions, 374 were fully completed (84.8% effective response rate). A priori power analysis using G\*Power confirmed that a minimum sample of 300 was sufficient to detect medium effect sizes ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ) with 80% power at  $\alpha = 0.05$ , ensuring statistical adequacy.

The final sample (Table I) was digitally engaged, young, and educated: 48.4% male, 51.6% female; 70.6% aged 18–34; 66.8% with bachelor’s degrees, 17.6% postgraduates; 61% reported following the influencer for 3 or more years, indicating sustained engagement and trust. Daily Instagram users accounted for 61.8% of the sample, confirming the platform’s relevance for influencer marketing.

### **Table I**

#### *4.2 Scale adaptation*

A comprehensive literature review of social media marketing, influencer marketing, and tourism marketing was conducted to identify the most suitable measurement scales for operationalizing the key constructs. These scales were then revised to ensure their relevance within the specific research context. To assess content validity, we consulted three academic experts in travel-related influencer marketing and sought their input to refine the wording of the measurement scales.

Next, we conducted a pre-test by distributing the questionnaire to 30 potential respondents and soliciting their feedback on the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions. After carefully reviewing the insights and comments from the pre-test, we made several minor adjustments to enhance the flow and wording of specific items, ensuring that the questionnaire was as clear and compelling as possible.

To further ensure the accuracy and reliability of the questionnaire and to mitigate potential CMB, this study employed both procedural and statistical remedies in line with Podsakoff et al. (2012). Procedurally, respondent anonymity was assured to reduce evaluation apprehension, standardized instructions were provided to minimize response ambiguity, and the order of questionnaire items was randomized to limit response pattern biases and method effects. These design strategies were implemented prior to data collection to strengthen the integrity of the measurement process.

Statistically, multiple complementary tests were conducted to assess the presence of CMB. First, Harman's single-factor test indicated that no single factor accounted for the majority of total variance, suggesting that CMB was unlikely to pose a significant concern. Second, a full collinearity assessment was performed, with all variance inflation factor (VIF) values falling below recommended thresholds, providing additional evidence against substantial CMB. Finally, a marker variable technique was implemented using a theoretically unrelated construct—participants' interest in technology and home lifestyle topics unrelated to tourism—including items such as: (1) *"I regularly follow content about technology innovations (e.g., gadgets, apps),"* (2) *"I enjoy reading articles or posts about home decor and interior design,"* and (3) *"I keep up with news about electronic devices and smart home products."* Including this marker

variable did not yield meaningful changes in path coefficients or significance levels, indicating that CMB did not materially influence the hypothesized relationships.

All constructs except demographic variables were measured using a standard 5-point Likert scale, where one (1) indicated strongly disagree and five (5) denoted strongly agree. Influencer-follower congruence was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from Venciute et al. (2023), whereas influencer-brand congruence was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Dhun and Dangi (2023). Perceived attractiveness, perceived expertise, and perceived trustworthiness of the social media influencers were measured using five items each from the well-established measurement scales proposed by Ohanian (1990). Next, three items from Kim and Baek's (2023) study were used to measure perceived authenticity. Moreover, five items from Spears and Singh (2004) were employed to gauge participants' attitudes toward the brand endorsed in the influencer's Instagram post. Finally, purchase behavior was assessed using a 6-item scale developed by Venciute et al. (2023), based on Voorhees et al.'s (2006) scale for purchase experience.

## **5. Findings**

The study findings were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a variance-based structural modeling technique well-suited for examining complex, predictive research models (Ali & Kim, 2015; Cheah et al., 2018; Hair Jr et al., 2020; Shair et al., 2021). PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, it accommodates complex models with multiple latent constructs and both mediating and moderating effects, allowing simultaneous estimation of direct and indirect relationships, which is essential given the hypothesized pathways among perceived influencer authenticity, source

credibility, congruence, brand attitudes, and purchase behavior. Second, it is robust to non-normal data distributions and smaller-to-moderate sample sizes (Hair Jr et al., 2020; Shair et al., 2021), conditions often encountered in field studies of social media and influencer marketing. Third, PLS-SEM emphasizes prediction and variance explained ( $R^2$ ), aligning with the study's objective of identifying key drivers of consumer responses in covert advertising contexts. Accordingly, a two-step PLS-SEM approach was adopted, comprising assessment of the measurement model to ensure construct validity and reliability, followed by evaluation of the structural model to test hypothesized relationships.

## ***5.1 Results of Measurement Model***

### ***5.1.1 Convergent validity***

The measurement model was considered, and convergent validity was assessed by examining the factor loadings, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE). From Table II, all scale items exceed the limit of 0.6, which is considered in this study. All scale items showed factor loadings higher than 0.7, except one. Furthermore, composite reliability also exceeded the minimum threshold level of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013; Hair Jr et al., 2022). Additionally, AVE values for all under-study constructs were beyond the recommended values of 0.50 (Cheah et al., 2018; Henseler et al., 2014). In addition to composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess construct reliability. All the constructs found Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.7, which is recommended by the literature (Ringle et al., 2012). The results of the measurement model are reported in Table II.

### **Table II**

### *5.1.2 Discriminant validity*

The literature suggested a novel and sophisticated criterion for evaluating discriminant validity, known as the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2015). This study opted for HTMT over the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (FLC) because FLC does not effectively assess the absence of discriminant validity across different research scenarios (Hameed et al., 2020). Therefore, the HTMT was employed to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs, and the corresponding values are reported in Table III. All values are less than 0.9, as recommended by Gold et al. (2001); thus, there is no correlation between the scale items across variables in the current study.

**Table III**

### *5.2 The PLS-SEM Results (Structural Model)*

The second step of PLS-SEM involves assessing the structural model to test the study's hypotheses. Prior research endorses the use of the PLS structural model for analyzing relationships among variables (Hair Jr et al., 2016; Hair Jr et al., 2021, 2022; Henseler et al., 2014). Three key measures were used to determine the significance of relationships: t-values, p-values, and confidence intervals. Because the hypotheses in this study are one-tailed, a t-value threshold of 1.64 was used (compared to 1.96 for two-tailed tests), with a p-value of 0.05 indicating significance. Confidence intervals were also employed: if zero falls between the lower limit (LL) and the upper limit (UL), the result is not significant; if zero is not present, the relationship is significant. The beta value was used to assess the direction of each relationship. Results are presented in Table II, and the Structural Model is illustrated in Figure I.

## Figure I

### 5.2.1 Hypotheses testing

Perceived attractiveness had a significant and positive influence on perceived authenticity ( $\beta = 0.205$ ;  $t = 3.646$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; LL = 0.112, UL = 0.301), supporting H1. Based on the bootstrap confidence intervals, the absence of zero within the 95% interval indicates a significant relationship at the 5% error level. Similarly, perceived trustworthiness positively influenced perceived authenticity ( $\beta = 0.136$ ;  $t = 2.73$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; LL = 0.07, UL = 0.226), supporting H2. However, H3 was not supported, as perceived expertise did not significantly affect perceived authenticity ( $\beta = -0.104$ ;  $t = 1.379$ ;  $p = 0.084$ ; LL = -0.201, UL = 0.056). This lack of significance may reflect contextual factors in the Sri Lankan tourism industry, where followers may prioritize relational trust, attractiveness, and congruence over technical expertise when evaluating influencer authenticity, particularly in highly parasocial, experience-oriented domains such as travel. H4 was supported, with influencer–brand congruence significantly enhancing perceived authenticity ( $\beta = 0.176$ ;  $t = 3.523$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; LL = 0.098, UL = 0.261), and H5 was also supported, as influencer–brand congruence positively affected brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.144$ ;  $t = 3.317$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; LL = 0.08, UL = 0.217). Further, perceived authenticity significantly influenced purchase behavior ( $\beta = 0.141$ ;  $t = 2.875$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ; LL = 0.054, UL = 0.22), supporting H6, and brand attitude had a strong positive effect on purchase behavior ( $\beta = 0.662$ ;  $t = 12.36$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; LL = 0.574, UL = 0.75), supporting H7. All results are reported in Table IV.

### Table IV

The moderating role of influencer–follower congruence was examined through Hypotheses 8a and 8b by assessing the interaction effects using standardized path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and confidence intervals. The results are presented in Table III. H8a tested

whether influencer–follower congruence moderates the relationship between perceived trustworthiness and perceived authenticity. The findings did not support this hypothesis ( $\beta = -0.059$ ;  $t = 1.418$ ;  $p = 0.078$ ;  $LL = -0.135$ ,  $UL = 0.007$ ), indicating that congruence does not significantly alter the impact of perceived trustworthiness on authenticity perceptions. This non-significant moderation suggests that followers may rely on trustworthiness cues largely independent of perceived similarity or value alignment with the influencer. Trustworthiness may be viewed as a fundamental and universally expected attribute, evaluated based on observable behavioral indicators such as transparency, consistency, and reliability rather than relational fit. Consequently, even when followers perceive low congruence with an influencer, their judgments of authenticity may remain primarily driven by core trust beliefs, reducing the incremental explanatory value of congruence as a boundary condition. Additionally, the relatively homogeneous cultural context of the sample and the standardized nature of influencer content on Instagram may have limited variability in perceived congruence, thereby attenuating its moderating influence.

In contrast, H8b investigated how influencer–follower congruence moderates the relationship between perceived expertise and perceived authenticity. The analysis revealed a statistically significant interaction ( $\beta = 0.101$ ;  $t = 1.649$ ;  $p = 0.050$ ;  $LL = -0.022$ ,  $UL = 0.181$ ), thereby supporting H8b. This finding suggests that congruence amplifies the impact of perceived expertise on authenticity assessments. Followers who feel a stronger sense of identification with an influencer are more likely to view expertise as authentic and credible. In essence, perceived similarity increases openness to competence-based cues, making expertise appear more genuine when followers feel a sense of value alignment or a personal connection with the influencer.

Collectively, these results highlight the *asymmetric influence* of influencer–follower congruence on perceived authenticity. Relational congruence distinctly amplifies the effect of expertise-based cues, whereas trustworthiness remains consistent across different levels of follower–influencer alignment. This asymmetry likely mirrors socio-cultural dynamics in Sri Lanka, where collectivist norms set trustworthiness as a baseline expectation in mediated relationships, while expertise necessitates relational validation to be regarded as credible and authentic. From a practical standpoint, these findings indicate that tourism marketers should emphasize influencer–follower alignment when showcasing technical competence or specialized expertise, while still relying on broadly recognized trust cues that function independently of perceived congruence.

The impact of influencer-follower congruence on the relationship between perceived expertise and perceived authenticity is reported using slope analysis, presented in Figure II. The red line in Figure II demonstrates the standard deviation below the mean, the green line demonstrates the standard deviation above the mean, and the blue line demonstrates the mean. The slope analysis shows that the blue line representing the mean is negatively sloped. The effect of influencer-follower congruence is negative. The red line shows the negative direction of influencer-follower congruence, as the slope is downward. Therefore, the negative slowing of influencer-follower congruence indicates that it weakens the relationship between perceived expertise and perceived authenticity.

### **Figure II**

Moreover, to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the structural model beyond path coefficients and significance levels, this study reports effect sizes ( $f^2$ ), explained variance ( $R^2$ ), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ). The strength of the effects of exogenous latent variables on

endogenous constructs was assessed using Cohen's (1988)  $f^2$  guidelines, where values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate small, medium, and large effects, respectively (see Table IV). Influencer–brand congruence, perceived attractiveness, and perceived trustworthiness exhibited small effects on perceived authenticity ( $f^2 = 0.035$ ,  $0.043$ , and  $0.022$ , respectively), while perceived expertise demonstrated a negligible effect ( $f^2 = 0.010$ ), consistent with its nonsignificant path coefficient. Influencer–brand congruence also showed a small effect on brand attitude ( $f^2 = 0.021$ ). Regarding purchase behavior, brand attitude exerted a strong effect ( $f^2 = 0.791$ ), whereas perceived authenticity had a small effect ( $f^2 = 0.036$ ).

The explanatory power of the model was evaluated using  $R^2$  values for endogenous constructs. The  $R^2$  for purchase behavior was 0.532, indicating that the model explains 53.2% of the variance in this construct, which represents a moderate-to-substantial level of explanatory capability. Finally, predictive relevance was assessed using PLS-Predict. The obtained  $Q^2$  value of 0.023 exceeds the recommended threshold of zero (Chin, 2010), confirming that the model possesses meaningful out-of-sample predictive relevance.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

By embedding Sri Lanka's contextual characteristics into the research design and analysis, this study offers three interrelated contributions that integrate theoretical rigor with practical relevance.

### *6.1 Theoretical contributions*

First, the study conceptualizes perceived influencer authenticity as a dynamic mediating process central to persuasion under covert or native advertising conditions. Prior research frequently

treats authenticity as a correlated or post-hoc evaluative outcome. The present findings indicate instead that authenticity functions as the psychological bridge through which credibility cues translate into persuasion outcomes when sponsorship intent is recognized or suspected. Attractiveness, trustworthiness, and influencer–brand congruence operate as antecedent signals that help consumers reconcile relational trust with latent skepticism. The contribution, therefore, lies in mechanism-level clarification—how authenticity mediates persuasion under recognized native advertising—rather than broad theoretical generalization across all influencer contexts.

Second, the study formalizes context as a boundary-conditioning factor rather than a descriptive backdrop. Influencer marketing research in the tourism domain often assumes cross-market transferability of PSR and credibility effects. By analytically leveraging Sri Lanka’s collectivist norms, relational trust structures, and evolving disclosure practices, the study demonstrates that authenticity judgments are contextually contingent and situationally consequential. The theoretical advance resides in specifying *when and why* authenticity mediates influencer–brand and influencer–follower congruence effects, positioning context as theory-shaping rather than merely illustrative.

Third, the findings integrate PSR, PKM, and the source credibility model by clarifying their interdependent roles. Existing literature frequently examines these constructs in isolation, leaving unresolved the question of how relational attachment, skepticism, and credibility cues jointly influence persuasion under covert sponsorship. The moderated mediation results show that influencer–follower congruence strengthens only selected credibility–authenticity pathways, highlighting the conditional nature of relational similarity rather than assuming uniform enhancement effects. This reframing refines the conceptual architecture of influencer persuasion by shifting emphasis from additive associations to process-oriented and conditional explanation.

## *6.2 Practical implications*

For tourism marketers and destination management organizations, the findings indicate that perceived authenticity functions as the central operational lever through which influencer collaborations affect brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Instead of relying primarily on follower counts, practitioners are advised to evaluate empirically supported antecedent dimensions—particularly trustworthiness and influencer–brand congruence, which show significant paths to authenticity.

Operational practices such as narrative consistency reviews, congruence audits, and audience sentiment monitoring are therefore framed as evidence-aligned strategies derived from observed credibility → authenticity pathways, rather than universal best-practice prescriptions. For instance, recommendations regarding transparency checks and PSR monitoring stem directly from the supported relationships linking trustworthiness and congruence to the formation of authenticity.

Sponsorship management should emphasize collaborations that preserve the influencer’s narrative voice while aligning the brand's identity with the influencer's values. The empirical model indicates that congruence enhances authenticity primarily when relational trust cues are present, suggesting that co-created content and visible disclosure practices may mitigate skepticism without undermining perceived genuineness. These implications are explicitly tied to the study’s mediation and moderation results rather than to generalized marketing norms.

From a societal perspective, the findings suggest the relevance of media literacy and transparent disclosure practices, particularly in environments where parasocial attachment and digital literacy vary. Conditional framing is intentionally adopted to signal informed reflection

rather than direct causal inference, acknowledging that the evidence is contextually bounded while highlighting ethical considerations associated with covert influencer communication.

Although the empirical focus is limited to Instagram within an emerging tourism market, the underlying mechanisms—credibility signaling, authenticity construction, PSRs, and persuasion knowledge activation—appear theoretically transferable to other platforms and markets. Platform affordances, audience demographics, and local disclosure norms are likely to moderate these effects, reinforcing the importance of contextual calibration rather than universal extrapolation.

### *6.3 Limitations and future research directions*

This study entails several limitations that inform future inquiry. First, the cross-sectional survey design limits causal inference and fails to capture the temporal evolution of authenticity and trust perceptions. Longitudinal and experimental approaches would enable scholars to trace how persuasion dynamics unfold across stages of influencer engagement and disclosure exposure.

Second, stimulus realism and influencer selection, although pre-tested, remain context-specific. Reliance on a single high-profile Sri Lankan influencer and the Instagram platform constrains external generalizability. Cross-cultural and cross-platform studies are therefore needed to examine how regulatory environments, cultural norms, and platform affordances condition authenticity-mediated persuasion. Demographic and psychographic moderators, including digital literacy and media skepticism, warrant further exploration to capture heterogeneity in consumer responses.

Third, perceived authenticity was modeled as a unidimensional mediator within covert advertising conditions. Future research should pursue multidimensional operationalizations and

parallel analyses across overt and covert sponsorship formats to refine theoretical precision and boundary conditions.

Finally, emerging platforms such as TikTok, characterised by algorithmic visibility and rapid content cycles, may generate distinct parasocial and persuasion dynamics. Platform-specific investigations would further elucidate how technological affordances interact with authenticity construction, thereby extending influencer marketing theory without presuming universal equivalence.

#### *6.4 Conclusion*

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that perceived influencer authenticity operates not merely as an evaluative perception but as a mechanism through which credibility, congruence, and relational attachment are translated into persuasion outcomes under conditions of recognized commercial intent. By situating this mechanism within a contextually bounded yet analytically meaningful tourism setting, the research clarifies how authenticity judgments emerge, when they matter most, and why their effects are conditional rather than uniform. Collectively, the findings contribute a process-oriented and context-sensitive perspective to influencer marketing scholarship, offering empirically grounded insights that are theoretically precise, managerially actionable, and ethically reflective without overextending beyond the study's evidential scope.

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