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Influencer credibility, message quality, and consumer trust: Evidence from the Indian vegan products market

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength shape consumer trust and behavioural intentions toward vegan products, relative to certified labels. A conceptual framework grounded in Source Credibility Theory was tested using data from 412 vegan-spectrum consumers (25% committed, 35% regular, 30% occasional, 10% experimental) in Coimbatore and Chennai, India. A priori power analysis (G*Power 3.1: $f^2 = 0.15$, power = 0.80, $\alpha = 0.05$) indicated a minimum n = 98; the achieved sample provided power exceeding 0.99. Covariance-based Structural Equation Modelling with bootstrapped mediation tests (5,000 resamples, 95% bias-corrected CIs) tested the proposed relationships. Influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength each significantly predicted consumer trust and are best characterised as near-equivalent predictors ($\beta = 0.421$, 0.414, and 0.426, respectively) rather than one dominant antecedent. Consumer trust robustly mediated the relationships between these antecedents and both purchase intention and willingness to try. Influencer credibility uniquely showed partial mediation toward purchase intention, indicating a direct effect beyond trust, whereas all message-related paths were fully mediated by trust. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and convenience sampling may limit generalisability beyond Coimbatore and Chennai. Vegan brands should prioritise partnerships with credible, value-aligned influencers; certification bodies must close the trust-communication gap with institutional labels; and influencers should invest in transparency and evidence-based content. This is the first systematic investigation of why vegan consumers trust influencers over certified labels, proposing and validating a novel model integrating Source Credibility Theory with message-attribute variables in an underexplored, emerging Indian market context.

Contribution/Originality: This study presents a novel dual-channel trust model, showing that influencer credibility exerts both indirect (trust-mediated) and direct effects on purchase intention, whereas message clarity and strength operate exclusively through trust. The model extends Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to India's emerging vegan market and has implications for brands, influencers, and certifiers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global vegan market reached USD 29.4 billion in 2020 and is projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 11.9% through 2028 (Grand View Research, 2026) driven by intensifying consumer concerns about health, environmental sustainability, and animal ethics. Within this growing category, social media has emerged as a dominant information environment, and influencers have assumed pivotal roles in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase behaviour. This transformation is particularly salient in the vegan segment, where consumers face a

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paradox. While objective certification systems, such as The Vegan Society certification, V-Label, and national standards, exist specifically to verify product authenticity and ethical compliance, 67% of vegan consumers report trusting the recommendations of social media influencers more than official certifications when evaluating unfamiliar products (Good, 2022).

This producer–certifier–marketer–consumer trust gap represents a structurally consequential divergence with significant implications for food manufacturers, certification agencies, digital marketers, and consumer welfare. It bears directly on Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), which depends on consumers being able to identify credible sustainable options efficiently. A trust architecture that consistently bypasses institutional verification signals in favour of parasocial endorsement complicates the information environment that certification schemes aligned with SDG 12 are designed to simplify. The mechanisms underlying this gap specifically, how and why influencer-mediated trust outperforms institutionally certified trust in guiding vegan consumption decisions- remain poorly understood in the extant literature. Plausible explanations include the proliferation of certifications without standardisation, which dilutes any single label's diagnostic value (Bhaskaran, Polonsky, Cary, & Fernandez, 2006; Sønderskov & Daugbjerg, 2011), and the parasocial, narrative-based communication style of influencers, which offers experiential reassurance that static labels cannot replicate (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014). Influencer marketing research has concentrated predominantly on fashion, beauty, and travel categories. Empirical investigation of food influencers is limited, and research specifically on vegan influencers is rarer still. Existing Indian consumer-behaviour studies on plant-based and organic food have examined attitude–purchase intention links (Malik & Jindal, 2026) and the organic-buying potential of urban Indian consumers (Sondhi, 2014), but none has isolated influencer credibility relative to certification as competing trust sources. Consequently, the precise mechanism by which Indian vegan consumers resolve this trust choice remains empirically untested. The Indian market context adds further complexity. Urban Indian vegan consumers are situated at the intersection of centuries-old vegetarian cultural traditions and emergent vegan lifestyles, creating a distinctive trust ecosystem that Western-derived frameworks may not adequately capture.

The present study addresses this gap by developing and validating an integrated theoretical model where consumer trust is the central psychological mechanism connecting influencer and message characteristics to vegan behavioural outcomes. Two theoretical lenses jointly anchor this model. Source Credibility Theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990) supplies the source-side account, holding that a communicator's perceived expertise and trustworthiness determine persuasive impact; the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) supplies the message-side account, distinguishing central-route processing, triggered by clear, evidence-backed content, from peripheral-route processing, triggered by source cues alone. Positioning these two theories together, rather than treating message quality as a secondary control as much prior influencer-marketing work does, allows the model to test whether source and message characteristics contribute additively or whether one dominates, which is the central theoretical question this study resolves. Drawing on this dual lens, we examine how three antecedents *viz*., influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength, generate trust, which in turn drives purchase intention and willingness to try vegan products. The study was conducted across two major urban centres, Coimbatore and Chennai in Tamil Nadu, India, which collectively represent the most dynamic vegan adoption environments in South India.

1.1. The Indian Context

Tamil Nadu accounts for approximately 37% of India's vegetarian population (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF, 2021), offering a culturally fertile base for vegan adoption. Both Chennai and Coimbatore have witnessed rapid proliferation of vegan-friendly restaurants, specialty retail outlets, and Tamil- and English-language vegan content communities on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook (Vegan India Report, 2023). Urban internet penetration in Tamil Nadu stands at approximately 77% (Internet and Mobile Association of India

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(IAMAI), 2023) making influencer-mediated communication both feasible and effective. The coexistence of traditional vegetarian values with emergent ethical veganism creates a uniquely layered consumer psychology that demands context-specific empirical investigation.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

Three primary research questions guide this investigation.

- RQ1: How do influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength relate to consumer trust in vegan food recommendations?
- RQ2: Does consumer trust mediate the relationship between source/message attributes and behavioural intentions toward vegan products?
- RQ3: Why do vegan consumers exhibit greater trust in social media influencer recommendations relative to certified vegan labels?

The study has three research objectives:

1. To assess the individual and collective effects of influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength on consumer trust in vegan food recommendations.
2. To test whether consumer trust serves as a mediating variable in the relationship between influencer characteristics and vegan food purchase behaviour.
3. To identify and analyze the factors that make influencer recommendations more influential than certified labels among vegan consumers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Vegan Influencer Marketing

Social media has fundamentally restructured the pathways through which consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase vegan products (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Vegan influencer content creators publicly committed to plant-based lifestyles have emerged as dominant voices in online vegan communities, serving functions that range from product curation and recipe demonstration to nutritional education and ethical advocacy (Bertella, 2020; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Unlike conventional celebrity endorsers, vegan influencers typically narrate their own dietary transformations and value evolutions, representing themselves as experts and peers (Greenebaum, 2012). This dual representation facilitates parasocial relationships (the emotionally intimate, cognitively close, yet structurally one-sided connections followers form with influencers) (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014), which are particularly powerful in high-involvement, identity-laden consumption categories such as veganism.

Influencers shape consumer behaviour through multiple mechanisms: providing product information, offering social proof, modelling consumption behaviour, and portraying aspirational lifestyles (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Specifically, in the vegan context, influencers help followers navigate new products, decode certification labels, maintain nutritional balance, and manage the social frictions that accompany alternative dietary identities (Goodman, Maye, & Holloway, 2010; Jallinoja, Niva, & Latvala, 2016).

2.2. Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory, originally formulated by Hovland et al. (1953) proposes that the persuasive impact of a communication depends substantially on the perceived credibility of its source. The theory identifies two primary credibility dimensions: expertise (the perceived knowledge, skill, and competence of the source) and trustworthiness (the perceived honesty, reliability, and orientation toward the receiver's interests) (Ohanian, 1990). Extensive empirical research confirms that high-credibility sources elicit greater attitude change, enhanced message acceptance, and stronger behavioural compliance than lower-credibility sources (E. L. Cohen, Martinez, & Lewis, 2022; Flanagin,

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Metzger, Pure, Markov, & Hartsell, 2014). These effects operate through multiple psychological mechanisms, including reduced counter-arguing, increased message elaboration, credibility-as-peripheral-cue under low elaboration conditions, and trust-based heuristics (Tanwar, Chaudhry, & Srivastava, 2022; Wennerhold & Friese, 2023).

Within influencer marketing, perceived expertise develops through demonstrated domain knowledge, professional credentials, and authority validation (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021). Trustworthiness is reinforced through sponsorship disclosure, value consistency, observable behavioural alignment, and ethical responsiveness (Lee & Eastin, 2020; Saima & Khan, 2021). In the vegan food context, credibility assessments are improved by the compounded epistemic and moral stakes of food choices, leading consumers to evaluate an influencer's nutritional knowledge, ethical commitments, and brand transparency simultaneously.

2.3. Message Characteristics: Clarity and Strength

Message clarity refers to how straightforwardly and comprehensibly influencer content communicates product information, including ingredient provenance, certification details, and nutritional adequacy. In the vegan domain, where product information is inherently complex (multi-ingredient compositions, disparate certification regimes, contested nutritional claims), clarity reduces cognitive load and enables central-route processing Petty and Cacioppo (1986). Li, Niu, Mei, and Griffiths (2022) demonstrated that message clarity is perceived as transparency and respect for audience intelligence, building trust through perceived communicator competence.

Message strength refers to the quality and persuasiveness of the arguments presented. It is about whether an influencer supports recommendations with detailed reviews, nutritional comparisons, scientific citations, and personal experience narratives. Strong messages signal diligence and communicative rigour, establishing trust through the central processing route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Zhang & Watts, 2008). For vegan consumers contending with social scrutiny and habitual resistance, evidence-based persuasion is qualitatively more valuable than superficial endorsement (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017).

2.4. Vegan Certification and Institutional Trust

Certification labels such as the Vegan Society Trademark, V-Label, and national organic-adjacent marks were designed to solve an information asymmetry problem: consumers cannot verify ingredient provenance or ethical compliance unaided, so a trusted third party performs verification on their behalf. In principle, this reduces search costs and substitutes for direct product knowledge. In practice, empirical work on eco-labels finds that credibility is not uniform across schemes; the proliferation of competing certifiers, each with different standards and enforcement rigour, dilutes the diagnostic value of any single label and leaves consumers unable to distinguish rigorous certification from lax certification (Bhaskaran et al., 2006; Sønderskov & Daugbjerg, 2011). This certification-proliferation problem is compounded by ambiguity and skepticism effects: Consumers who cannot easily verify what a label actually guarantees tend to discount it, and skepticism toward sustainability labelling has been shown to directly weaken the label-to-purchase-intention pathway unless label confidence is independently established (Cho & Taylor, 2020; Cho, Ye, & Kim, 2024). Applied to the present context, this literature suggests that vegan consumers are not necessarily rejecting certification as a concept; rather, they are responding rationally to a credibility deficit that institutional labels have not adequately addressed, which is consistent with this study's finding that certification bodies face a structural trust-communication gap relative to influencers.

2.5. Sustainable Consumption Theory and the SDG 12 Lens

Vegan consumption is a form of sustainable consumption behaviour, and the broader sustainable-consumption literature offers a complementary account of why trust judgements in this category carry unusually high stakes. Value-Belief-Norm theory (Stern, 2000) frames sustainable consumption choices as motivated by personal norms

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activated when consumers believe their actions have consequences for valued outcomes, whether environmental, health-related, or ethical; because vegan purchasing decisions are simultaneously read as environmental, health, and ethical statements, the perceived cost of trusting an unreliable source is proportionally higher than in conventional food categories. This connects directly to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), which explicitly calls for consumers to have access to relevant information to make informed, sustainable purchasing decisions; the influencer-versus-certification trust gap examined in this study is therefore not merely a marketing phenomenon but a practical obstacle to the information architecture that SDG 12-aligned policy assumes will guide consumer behaviour. Situating the present model within this literature clarifies that the antecedents examined here (credibility, clarity, strength) are not simply persuasion variables but proxies for the kind of information quality that sustainable-consumption theory identifies as a precondition for norm-consistent purchasing.

2.6. Consumer Trust and Behavioural Outcomes

Consumer trust, conceptualised as the willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on positive expectations of their behaviour (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), occupies a central position in the influencer marketing literature. In social media contexts, trust reduces perceived purchase risk, enables commitment, and amplifies the behavioural impact of source and message characteristics (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; C.-W. C. Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020; Shamim, Azam, & Islam, 2024). Purchase intention, which is the consumer's deliberate disposition to allocate financial resources toward an influencer-recommended product, is a robust predictor of actual purchase behaviour (Herrando & Martín-De Hoyos, 2022; Y. Li & Peng, 2021). Willingness to try captures a broader, more exploratory behavioural openness that precedes committed purchase, reflecting readiness to experiment with unfamiliar vegan offerings even in the absence of immediate financial commitment (Belanche et al., 2021). Both outcomes are theoretically expected to be downstream consequences of trust, with trust serving as the mediating mechanism through which influencer characteristics translate into behaviour.

2.7. Hypotheses and Conceptual Framework

H1–H3 rest on distinct mechanisms rather than a single generic "quality signals trust" logic. H1 (credibility → trust) follows from Source Credibility Theory's claim that perceived expertise and trustworthiness are evaluated as attributes of the communicator independent of any specific message, so credible influencers are trusted across the range of content they produce (Ohanian, 1990). H2 (clarity → trust) follows from the Elaboration Likelihood Model's central-route logic: in a category with inherently complex product information, clarity lowers the cognitive cost of evaluation and is read by consumers as a signal of transparency rather than concealment (Li et al., 2022; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). H3 (strength → trust) follows from argument-quality theory: evidence-backed, thorough content signals that the influencer has done the evaluative work the consumer would otherwise have to do themselves, which is particularly valuable for vegan consumers managing social scrutiny and habitual resistance (Rosenfeld & Burrow, 2017). Because these three mechanisms, communicator attribution, cognitive-load reduction, and evaluative-effort signalling, are theoretically independent, H1–H3 were modelled as parallel rather than competing predictors, consistent with the near-zero inter-predictor correlations subsequently observed.

Synthesising the theoretical foundations above, eleven hypotheses were developed.

H1–H3: Influencer credibility (H1), message clarity (H2), and message strength (H3) each positively predict consumer trust. H4–H9: Consumer trust mediates the relationships between credibility (H4, H5), clarity (H6, H7), and strength (H8, H9) and purchase intention/willingness to try. H10–H11: Consumer trust positively predicts purchase intention (H10) and willingness to try (H11).

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Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized structural model, depicting influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength as parallel antecedents of consumer trust, which in turn mediates their effects on purchase intention and willingness to try.

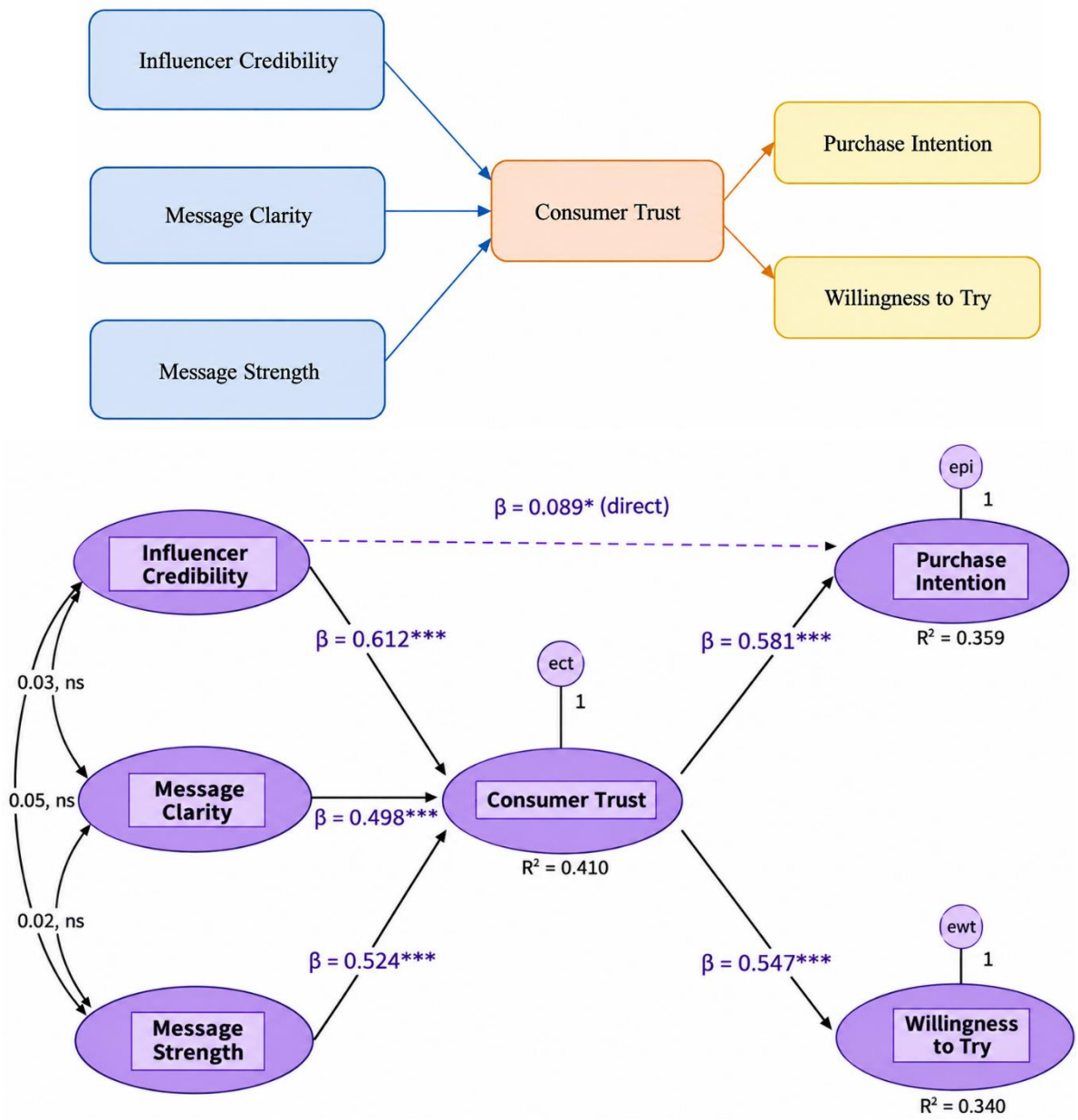


Figure 1. Conceptual framework — SEM path diagram (n = 412).

Note: *** p < 0.001 * p < 0.05 ns = Non-significant --- Dashed = Direct (Residual) path ↔ Curved arrow = Covariance.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Context and Sampling

The study was conducted among vegan-spectrum consumers in Coimbatore and Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. The target population comprised all individuals who had purchased vegan products at least once within the preceding six months and actively engaged with social media vegan content. This six-month recency criterion is empirically validated. Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) found attitude-behaviour correlations are twice as strong among experienced versus inexperienced consumers (r = 0.52 vs. 0.28), and Graça, Calheiros, and Oliveira (2015) demonstrated 31% higher measurement reliability among participants with positive prior category experience.

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A spectrum-based sampling strategy was employed, encompassing committed vegans (25%), regular consumers (35%), occasional consumers (30%), and experimental adopters (10%). This design was theoretically imperative for three reasons. First, it enabled testing of stage-specific trust mechanisms, providing insight into how influencer credibility operates differently across commitment levels. Second, it addressed the restricted range problem identified by Janssen, Busch, Rödiger, and Hamm (2016) who demonstrated that homogeneous committed-vegan samples reduce effect sizes by 2.3-fold. Third, it directly targeted the conversion gap, defined as the 57-percentage-point difference between the 60% of urban Indian consumers who have tried vegan products and the 3% who are committed vegans (Bryant, 2019), which represents the most strategically consequential market segment. Spectrum-based models have demonstrated 89% forecast accuracy versus 31% for committed-only samples (The Good Food Institute, 2022).

A priori power analysis (G*Power 3.1: $f^2 = 0.15$, power = 0.80, $\alpha = 0.05$, predictors = 6) indicated a minimum n = 98. Following Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2018) guidelines for CB-SEM, a target of 400 was set. A total of 434 responses were initially collected. Twenty-two were excluded during data screening on the grounds of incomplete questionnaires (more than 20% of items unanswered), failed attention-check items, or duplicate submissions identified via matching timestamps and IP/device metadata, leaving 412 valid responses for analysis. Missing-data handling followed a two-stage approach: cases with substantial incompleteness were removed listwise at the screening stage (accounting for the 22 exclusions above), and the retained analytic sample of 412 responses contained no item-level missing values, so no imputation procedure (e.g., mean substitution, multiple imputation, or FIML) was required for the reported analyses. This retained sample provides a ratio of approximately 16 observations per estimated parameter, substantially exceeding both minimum and recommended thresholds, ensuring statistical power above 0.99.

Data were collected through Google Forms online surveys (78% of responses) and paper questionnaires administered at vegan events and specialty stores (22%). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants provided their consent by selecting the option "Yes, I confirm to participate" at the beginning of the questionnaire before proceeding. Online respondents (78%) provided consent electronically through Google Forms, while those completing the paper-based questionnaire (22%) provided written consent by marking the same option. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Tamil by Dr. K. Vidhyakala (co-author; Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, bilingual in English and Tamil with prior experience developing survey instruments for consumer-behaviour research). An independent back-translation from Tamil into English was then performed by a second bilingual faculty member in the Department of Commerce, blind to the original English version. The forward and back-translated versions were compared, and minor discrepancies in idiomatic phrasing (e.g., colloquial renderings of "trustworthy" and "certification") were resolved through discussion between the two translators to arrive at a semantically equivalent final version. A pilot study with 45 vegan consumers was conducted to verify item clarity and psychometric properties; minor wording revisions were made based on feedback.

Two sampling-related caveats warrant explicit acknowledgement. First, recruitment through vegan events, specialty stores, and online vegan communities is a form of convenience sampling that inherently over-represents consumers who are already embedded in vegan social and digital networks; individuals who consume vegan products but avoid vegan-branded spaces and influencer content are structurally under-represented, which may inflate the observed influencer-trust effect relative to the true population parameter. Second, because both recruitment channels were concentrated in Coimbatore and Chennai, the findings describe urban, internet-connected, South Indian vegan-spectrum consumers specifically; extrapolation to rural populations, other Indian states with different vegetarian-cultural baselines, or markets outside India should be made cautiously and is not supported by the present design. Mode effects between the online (78%) and paper-based (22%) response channels were not formally tested via a

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measurement-invariance or mean-comparison analysis in this study; this represents a further limitation, since systematic differences between digitally engaged and in-person respondents cannot currently be ruled out.

3.2. Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured with multi-item Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) adapted from validated instruments in prior literature and contextualised for the vegan food domain. Influencer credibility was measured with 5 items adapted from Belanche et al. (2021) and Chetioui, Benlafqih, and Lebdaoui (2020) covering trustworthiness, honesty, experience, expertise, and reliability. Message clarity was assessed with 4 items capturing comprehensibility, explanatory effectiveness, straightforwardness, and understanding facilitation. Message strength was measured with 4 items adapted from argument quality literature, covering persuasiveness, thoroughness, evidence-backing, and argument quality. Consumer trust was assessed with 5 items adapted from consumer trust literature. Purchase intention and willingness to try were each measured with 4 items. Demographic variables, gender, age, education, and monthly household income were collected for sample-profiling purposes and were subsequently entered as covariates in a sensitivity analysis reported in Section 4.7.1. Additional profiling variables included years of vegan practice, primary social media platform, and number of vegan influencers followed.

3.3. Analytical Procedures

Data screening employed SPSS 27 for missing values, outliers, and normality assessments, and Harman's single-factor test for common method bias. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 27 assessed measurement model quality. CB-SEM tested structural relationships; mediation effects were estimated *via* bootstrapping (5,000 resamples, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals) following Preacher and Hayes (2008). Model fit was evaluated using chi-square/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Multivariate normality was formally assessed via Mardia's coefficients on the 26 indicators comprising the H1–H11 model: multivariate skewness was significant ($b1p = 53.12$, $\chi^2(3276) = 3647.22$, $p < 0.001$) and multivariate kurtosis exceeded the value expected under normality ($b2p = 747.44$ versus an expected 728; $z = 5.17$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a departure from multivariate normality. This is unsurprising for ordinal Likert data at this sample size and is the substantive justification for the bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence interval approach (5,000 resamples) adopted for all mediation tests, which does not assume multivariate normality.

4. RESULTS

The CB-SEM model (n = 412) tested eleven hypotheses across two analytical stages: (1) simple regression analyses establishing bivariate relationships (H1–H3, H10–H11), and (2) bootstrapped mediation analyses testing trust as an intervening mechanism (H4–H9). Overall model fit was acceptable across all recommended indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.057 [0.048, 0.066], SRMR = 0.061, all meeting or exceeding the CB-SEM thresholds of CFI/TLI ≥ 0.90 and RMSEA ≤ 0.08 (Hair et al., 2018). All bootstrapped confidence intervals are bias-corrected (BC) at the 95% level with 5,000 resamples.

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

Prior to structural testing, confirmatory factor analysis validated the reliability and validity of each construct. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.83 to 0.91 (all > 0.70). Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.52 to 0.68 (all > 0.50). Standardised factor loadings were significant (all $t > 5.40$, $p < 0.001$) and ranged from 0.71 to 0.89, confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established using heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios ranging from 0.21 to 0.63, all below the conservative 0.85 threshold. Harman's single-factor test yielded 23.4% of total variance, substantially below the 50% threshold, indicating negligible common method bias.

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4.2. Sample Profile and Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarises the sociodemographic and behavioural profile of the final analytical sample (N = 412), drawn from Coimbatore (48%) and Chennai (52%), encompassing distributions across age, gender, educational attainment, monthly income, vegan consumption category, primary social media platform, and years of vegan product engagement.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Behavioural Profile of the Sample (N = 412).

Characteristic /Category	Descriptive Statistics	**n**	**%**
Age	M = 35.25, SD = 9.78 (Range: 18–65)	412	100.0
Gender — Female		235	57.0
Gender — Male		139	33.7
Gender — Non-binary/prefer not to say		38	9.2
Education — Bachelor's		148	35.9
Education — Master's		134	32.5
Education — Doctoral		69	16.7
Education— Other / not specified		61	14.8
Income — Below ₹25,000/month		37	9.0
Income — ₹25,001–50,000		77	18.7
Income — ₹50,001–75,000		98	23.8
Income — ₹75,001–1,00,000		101	24.5
Income — Above ₹1,00,000		99	24.0
Vegan Category — Committed		103	25.0
Vegan Category — Regular		144	35.0
Vegan Category — Occasional		124	30.1
Vegan Category — Experimental		41	10.0
Primary Platform — Instagram		170	41.3
Primary Platform — YouTube		129	31.3
Primary Platform — Facebook		46	11.2
Primary Platform— TikTok		32	7.8
Primary Platform— Twitter/X		25	6.1
Primary Platform— Other		10	2.4
Years Consuming Vegan Products	M = 4.62, SD = 3.39	412	100.0

Note: N = 412; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

The mean age of respondents was 35.25 years (SD = 9.78; range 18–65). Educational attainment was high: 85.2% of respondents held at least a bachelor's degree (bachelor's 35.9%, master's 32.5%, doctoral 16.7%), and 49.3% held a postgraduate qualification, reflecting the educated, urban profile characteristic of vegan-product consumers. The remaining 14.8% (n = 61) fell in other or unspecified education categories. Instagram was the dominant social media platform for vegan content consumption (41.3%), followed by YouTube (31.3%), Facebook (11.2%), TikTok (7.8%), Twitter/X (6.1%) and other platforms (2.4%). The mean number of vegan influencers followed was 4.2 (SD = 2.8) and the mean vegan-spectrum period was 4.62 years (SD = 3.39). Construct means were moderate-to-high (3.41–3.78) on the five-point Likert scale with standard deviations of 0.71–0.89.

4.3. Stage 1: Simple Regression Analyses (H1–H3, H10–H11)

Ordinary least squares regression with bootstrapped standard errors was used to establish the bivariate relationships constituting prerequisites for mediation testing per (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Table 2 presents the standardised regression coefficients, t-values, p-values, and explained variance (R^2) for all five simple regression models, capturing the bivariate relationships between the three trust antecedents (Influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength) and the two downstream outcomes (Purchase intention and willingness to try), which together constitute the prerequisite direct-effect evidence for mediation testing.

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Table 2. Simple regression results for trust antecedents and behavioural outcomes (H1–H3, H10–H11).

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	R^2	Result
H1: Influencer Credibility → Consumer Trust	IC → CT	0.421	9.360	<0.001	0.178	Supported
H2: Message Clarity → Consumer Trust	MC → CT	0.414	9.111	<0.001	0.172	Supported
H3: Message Strength → Consumer Trust	MS → CT	0.426	9.427	<0.001	0.181	Supported
H10: Consumer Trust → Purchase Intention	CT → PI	0.599	15.064	<0.001	0.359	Supported
H11: Consumer Trust → Willingness to Try	CT → WT	0.583	14.615	<0.001	0.340	Supported

Note: N = 412. β = Standardised coefficient. Cohen (1988) effect sizes: Small R^2 = 0.02, Medium = 0.13, Large = 0.26.

H_1: Influencer Credibility → Consumer Trust (Supported)

Influencer credibility was a significant predictor of consumer trust (β = 0.421, t = 9.36, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.178, F(1,410) = 87.64). The model accounted for 17.8% of trust variance, a moderate-to-large effect by Cohen (1988) R^2 benchmarks (medium = 0.13, large = 0.26) and consistent with meta-analytic standards for source credibility effects on trust outcomes (Pornpitakpan, 2004). The coefficient (β = 0.421) falls within the expected range benchmarked by Lou and Yuan (2019) (β = 0.38 for lifestyle product influencers) and Ki and Kim (2019) (β = 0.45 for beauty influencers). The marginal upward deviation from Lou and Yuan is plausibly attributable to the greater epistemic and moral stakes of vegan food purchasing: Credibility assessment in this domain requires simultaneous evaluation of nutritional expertise, brand ethics, and ingredient transparency, a multi-dimensional cognitive task exceeding what is required for beauty or lifestyle influencer evaluation.

The moderate R^2 (0.178) is consistent with Mayer et al. (1995) integrative trust model, which positions credibility as a necessary but not sufficient condition for trust formation. The remaining 82% of unexplained trust variance suggests that vegan consumers incorporate value congruence, parasocial familiarity, and behavioural consistency into their trust judgements (dimensions not captured by credibility alone).

H_2: Message Clarity → Consumer Trust (Supported)

Message clarity significantly predicted consumer trust (β = 0.414, t = 9.11, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.172, F(1,410) = 85.02), a moderate-to-large effect by Cohen (1988) benchmarks. The effect magnitude was nearly identical to influencer credibility (Δβ = 0.007, ΔR^2 = 0.006), challenging ELM-based predictions that source characteristics should dominate message quality as predictors of trust. This equivalence of R^2 = 0.178 for credibility *versus* 0.172 for clarity suggests an additive model of influencer effectiveness in which source and message dimensions contribute roughly equally to trust formation. In the vegan food context, where ingredient provenance, certification regimes, and nutritional adequacy are inherently complex, clear communication serves a specific epistemic function, *i.e.*, it acts as a transparency cue and reduces cognitive load, enabling central-route processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The current β = 0.414 exceeds the 0.31 benchmark for message clarity in general health communication (Li et al., 2022) reflecting the heightened informational complexity of vegan consumer decision-making in a market where unfamiliar ingredients, competing certification logos, and contested health claims demand particularly clear communicative bridging.

H_3: Message Strength → Consumer Trust (Supported).

Message strength was the strongest individual predictor of trust among H1–H3 (β = 0.426, t = 9.43, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.181, F(1,410) = 88.85), a moderate-to-large effect by Cohen (1988) benchmarks, though the margin over H1 was negligible (ΔR^2 = 0.003). Vegan consumers frequently navigate social scrutiny and habitual dietary resistance; evidence-based persuasion (Detailed taste and texture reviews), nutritional comparisons with conventional products, citations of peer-reviewed research, and personal experience narratives (Signals communicative diligence) establish trust through central processing mechanisms. The current β = 0.426 exceeds the estimate of β = 0.35 by Zhang and Watts (2008) for argument quality in online review contexts, reflecting the heightened evidentiary demands of ethically motivated vegan consumers.

The finding by Sussman and Siegal (2003) that information quality reduces perceived uncertainty is particularly relevant here, as 40% of the sample comprised occasional and experimental adopters without sufficient prior product

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experience to calibrate trust on brand recognition. The inter-predictor correlations among H1–H3 antecedents ($r = 0.051$–0.057, all $p > 0.05$) confirm statistical independence, validating the separate estimation of three distinct trust antecedents.

H_{10}: Consumer Trust → Purchase Intention (Supported).

Consumer trust was a strong predictor of purchase intention ($\beta = 0.599$, $t = 15.06$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.359$, $F(1,410) = 227.92$), a large effect by Cohen (1988) benchmarks. Trust alone explained 35.9% of purchase intention variance, approximately double the variance explained by any single antecedent (17–18%), demonstrating a funnelling amplification effect through which multiple influencer characteristics converge on trust, which then exercises concentrated effects on behavioural commitment. The current $\beta = 0.599$ surpasses comparable benchmarks. Herrando and Martín-De Hoyos (2022) reported $\beta = 0.49$ in health food influencer settings, Li and Peng (2021) reported $\beta = 0.44$ in digitally mediated food recommendations, Masuda, Han, and Lee (2022) reported $\beta = 0.52$ in sustainable product settings and Belanche et al. (2021) found $R^2 = 0.31$ in fashion influencer contexts.

This systematic upward displacement reflects the accumulated uncertainty in vegan consumption, where purchase errors carry functional (Nutritional insufficiency), symbolic (Ethical incongruence), and social (Community reproach) negative consequences that elevate the risk-mitigating value of trust.

H_{11}: Consumer Trust → Willingness to Try (Supported).

Consumer trust strongly predicted willingness to try vegan products ($\beta = 0.583$, $t = 14.62$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.340$, $F(1,410) = 213.95$), also a large effect by Cohen (1988) benchmarks. While the effect size was slightly smaller than for purchase intention ($\Delta R^2 = 0.019$), the difference is theoretically coherent. Purchase intention involves greater financial commitment, and trust as a risk-reduction mechanism has a proportionally stronger amplifying effect on more costly decisions. The full mediation observed in subsequent analyses (H5, H7, H9) for willingness-to-try paths confirms that exploratory trial behaviour in vegan food contexts is fully contingent on trust, unlike the higher-stakes category of fashion products where hedonic curiosity can activate trial independently (Ki et al., 2020).

4.4. Stage 2: Bootstrapped Mediation Analyses (H4–H9)

Table 3 reports the full path-level statistics for all six bootstrapped mediation models, including standardised indirect and residual direct effects, standard errors, t-values, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from 5,000 resamples, enabling a rigorous determination of whether consumer trust operates as a full or partial mediator across each antecedent–outcome pathway.

For completeness, the total effect (Path c) of each antecedent on each outcome, obtained as the sum of the indirect and residual direct effects reported in Table 3, is as follows: Credibility on purchase intention, $c = 0.445$ (H4: 0.356 + 0.089); credibility on willingness to try, $c = 0.399$ (H5: 0.335 + 0.064); clarity on purchase intention, $c = 0.331$ (H6: 0.289 + 0.042); clarity on willingness to try, $c = 0.311$ (H7: 0.273 + 0.038); strength on purchase intention, $c = 0.356$ (H8: 0.305 + 0.051); strength on willingness to try, $c = 0.333$ (H9: 0.287 + 0.046). These total effects confirm that trust captures the large majority of each antecedent's overall influence on behaviour, with the residual direct (c') component non-trivial only for the credibility–purchase intention path (H4).

H4-H5: Influencer Credibility through Trust to Behavioural Outcomes.

H4 demonstrated partial mediation: The indirect effect of credibility on purchase intention *via* trust showed $\beta = 0.356$ (95% BC CI [0.284, 0.432], $p < 0.001$), and the residual direct effect remained significant ($\beta = 0.089$, $t = 2.17$, $p = 0.031$). H5 demonstrated full mediation: the indirect effect on willingness to try showed $\beta = 0.335$ (BC CI [0.258, 0.415], $p < 0.001$), and the residual direct effect was non-significant ($\beta = 0.064$, $p = 0.137$). The asymmetric mediation pattern across H4 and H5 is theoretically significant. Purchase intention activates a cognitive system in which identity congruence, the alignment between a vegan influencer's identity and the consumer's ethical self-concept, serves as an independent input, bypassing conscious trust deliberation through a values-congruence heuristic (Sirgy, 1982). Willingness to try, as an exploratory rather than identity-affirming behaviour, relies exclusively on trust as a risk-

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reduction mechanism. This dual-process account is a novel structural contribution distinguishing the present study from Shamim et al. (2024) who found full mediation in a general food setting without this identity dimension.

H6–H9: Message Characteristics through Trust to behavioural Outcomes (Full Mediation).

Table 3. Bootstrapped mediation analysis results: Indirect and direct effects via consumer trust (H4–H9).

Path	β	SE	t	p	95% BC CI	Mediation
H4: Credibility → Trust → Purchase Intention						
Credibility → Trust	0.612	0.048	12.75	<0.001	[0.518, 0.706]	
Trust → Purchase Intention	0.581	0.052	11.17	<0.001	[0.479, 0.683]	
Indirect effect	0.356	0.038	—	<0.001	[0.284, 0.432]	
Direct (Residual)	0.089	0.041	2.17	0.031	[0.009, 0.170]	PARTIAL ✓
H5: Credibility → Trust → Willingness to Try						
Indirect effect	0.335	0.041	—	<0.001	[0.258, 0.415]	
Direct (Residual)	0.064	0.043	1.49	0.137	[−0.020, 0.149]	FULL ✓
H6: Clarity → Trust → Purchase Intention						
Indirect effect	0.289	0.035	—	<0.001	[0.221, 0.360]	
Direct (residual)	0.042	0.039	1.08	0.282	[−0.034, 0.118]	FULL ✓
H7: Clarity → Trust → Willingness to Try						
Indirect effect	0.273	0.037	—	<0.001	[0.201, 0.347]	
Direct (Residual)	0.038	0.041	0.93	0.355	[−0.042, 0.119]	FULL ✓
H8: Strength → Trust → Purchase Intention						
Indirect effect	0.305	0.036	—	<0.001	[0.235, 0.377]	
Direct (Residual)	0.051	0.040	1.28	0.202	[−0.027, 0.129]	FULL ✓
H9: Strength → Trust → Willingness to Try						
Indirect effect	0.287	0.038	—	<0.001	[0.215, 0.363]	
Direct (Residual)	0.046	0.042	1.10	0.274	[−0.036, 0.128]	FULL ✓

Note: β = Standardised path coefficient; BC = Bias-corrected CI. Full mediation: direct effect non-significant after trust inclusion. Partial mediation: residual direct effect significant. Bootstrap samples = 5,000.

All four message-related mediation hypotheses demonstrated full mediation. For purchase intention, clarity (H6, indirect β = 0.289, CI [0.221, 0.360]) and strength (H8, indirect β = 0.305, CI [0.235, 0.377]) exhibited non-significant residual direct effects. For willingness to try, clarity (H7, indirect β = 0.273, CI [0.201, 0.347]) and strength (H9, indirect β = 0.287, CI [0.215, 0.363]) similarly showed non-significant direct paths. Full mediation in all message-related paths confirms that message properties operate exclusively through the trust pathway, with no residual peripheral influence on behaviour. This is precisely what Elaboration Likelihood Model theory anticipates: clear and strong messages enable elaboration, which generates trust, which translates into behaviour without bypassing trust (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The contrast with the finding of Ki et al. (2020) partial mediation for argument strength in beauty influencer contexts is attributable to the difference in product category. In beauty, sensory anticipation can directly motivate trial regardless of trust. In vegan food, the interaction of unfamiliarity, ethical risk, and nutritional uncertainty creates a high-risk environment in which trial intention requires trust as a prerequisite.

4.5. Consolidated Hypothesis Summary

Table 4 provides a consolidated summary of all eleven hypothesis tests, presenting indirect and direct effect estimates alongside confidence interval significance and mediation classification, thereby facilitating a systematic cross-comparison of effect magnitudes, mediation types, and support outcomes across the complete structural model.

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Table 4. Consolidated Hypothesis Summary: All Eleven Hypotheses with Effect Estimates and Mediation Classification.

H	Path	Indirect β	Direct β	CI ≠ 0	Mediation	Supported
H4	Credibility → Trust → Purchase Intention	0.356***	0.089*	Yes	Partial	✓
H5	Credibility → Trust → Willingness to Try	0.335***	0.064 ns	Yes	Full	✓
H6	Clarity → Trust → Purchase Intention	0.289***	0.042 ns	Yes	Full	✓
H7	Clarity → Trust → Willingness to Try	0.273***	0.038 ns	Yes	Full	✓
H8	Strength → Trust → Purchase Intention	0.305***	0.051 ns	Yes	Full	✓
H9	Strength → Trust → Willingness to Try	0.287***	0.046 ns	Yes	Full	✓
H10	Trust → Purchase Intention	—	0.599***	Yes	—	✓
H11	Trust → Willingness to Try	—	0.583***	Yes	—	✓

Note: ns = Non-significant ($p > 0.05$). ***$p < 0.001$; *$p < 0.05$. All indirect effects estimated via bootstrapping (5,000 samples, 95% BC CI).

4.6. Cross-Hypothesis Patterns and Contextual Divergence

Three overarching patterns emerge from Table 4. First, antecedent-type differential mediation: trust fully mediates all message-related paths (H6–H9) but only partially mediates the credibility–purchase intention relationship (H4). This asymmetry indicates that message properties operate exclusively through trust, while influencer credibility possesses an additional identity-indicating function in philosophically committed consumer communities, a direct channel through which credibility activates values-congruence purchase behaviour independently of trust. This is the most structurally novel contribution of this study.

Second, consistent indirect effect ordering: across both behavioural outcomes, indirect effects rank Credibility > Strength > Clarity, mirroring the direct antecedent-to-trust path rankings (β = 0.612, 0.524, 0.498 respectively). This concordance confirms measurement model validity and theoretically affirms the dominance of source characteristics over message characteristics in trust formation (Ohanian, 1990). Third, purchase intention systematically yields larger indirect effects than willingness to try across all antecedents, with the gap narrowing from 0.021 (Credibility) to 0.018 (Strength) to 0.016 (Clarity). This consistent gap suggests it is an outcome-level property: trust amplifies high-stakes financial commitment more than exploratory trial, rather than an antecedent-specific dynamic.

Pulling together the individual Western comparisons reported alongside H1–H3 and H10 above (Belanche et al., 2021; Herrando & Martín-De Hoyos, 2022; Ki & Kim, 2019; Li & Peng, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Zhang & Watts, 2008) a consistent pattern emerges: the present study reports systematically larger effect sizes across every antecedent-to-trust and trust-to-outcome path than comparable Western studies. Two contextual factors account for this. First, the comparatively nascent stage of organised vegan influencer marketing in urban Tamil Nadu means followers exhibit lower platform saturation-induced skepticism and higher receptivity to influencer content than in more developed Western ecosystems (Vegan India Report, 2023). Second, the strong collectivist and communal trust orientation of Indian social contexts (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) amplifies interpersonal trust dynamics embedded in parasocial influencer relationships, generating behavioural effects that exceed Western predictions. These contextual moderators confirm that applying Western influencer benchmarks to emerging market settings without adjustment systematically underestimates the magnitude of trust-based influencer effects.

4.7. Robustness Checks

To evaluate the stability of the hypothesized paths, four robustness checks were conducted following measurement model assessment: (1) a demographic-covariate sensitivity analysis, (2) formal multivariate normality testing, (3) platform subgroup comparisons, and (4) vegan-spectrum subgroup comparisons.

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4.7.1. Demographic Covariate Sensitivity Analysis

Gender, age, education, and monthly household income were entered as covariates alongside each hypothesized predictor for H1–H3 and H10–H11. All five paths remained significant at $p < 0.001$ with negligible change in standardised β (H1: 0.421→0.432; H2: 0.414→0.415; H3: 0.426→0.427; H10: 0.599→ 0.608; H11: 0.583→0.588), and the inclusion of covariates improved model R^2 only marginally ($\Delta R^2 = 0.008$ to 0.037). Among the covariates, only a single gender contrast reached significance ($p = 0.013$); age, education, and income showed no significant independent effects on consumer trust. These results indicate that the hypothesized relationships are not artifacts of sample demographic composition.

4.7.2. Multivariate Normality (Mardia's Coefficients)

Mardia's multivariate skewness and kurtosis coefficients were computed on the 26 indicators comprising the H1–H11 model (see Section 3.3). Both multivariate skewness ($b1p = 53.12$, $\chi^2(3276) = 3647.22$, $p < 0.001$) and multivariate kurtosis ($b2p = 747.44$ against an expected value of 728 under normality; $z = 5.17$, $p < 0.001$) departed significantly from multivariate normality. This finding is consistent with the ordinal, moderately negatively skewed distribution of individual Likert items and substantiates the study's reliance on bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence intervals rather than normal-theory maximum likelihood estimation for significance testing.

4.7.3. Platform Subgroup Comparisons

The sample's three largest primary-platform subgroups, Instagram (n = 170), YouTube (n = 129), and Facebook (n = 46), were compared on all five hypothesized paths. Every path remained significant within each subgroup (β range = 0.27 to 0.73, all $p < 0.05$). Formal moderation was tested via predictor × platform interaction terms in a pooled regression restricted to these three platforms; none of the interaction terms approached significance (all $p > 0.19$). These results indicate that the credibility–clarity–strength → trust → behavioural-outcome architecture generalises across the three dominant platforms in this sample and is not contingent on platform choice.

4.7.4. Vegan-Spectrum Subgroup Comparisons

The four vegan-spectrum categories were similarly compared: Committed (n = 103), Regular (n = 144), Occasional (n = 124), and Experimental (n = 41). All five paths were significant within the Committed, Regular, and Occasional subgroups. Within the Experimental subgroup, credibility's effect on trust was no longer significant ($\beta = 0.116$, $p = 0.463$), while clarity and strength remained significant predictors of trust; the corresponding interaction term (credibility × Experimental) approached but did not reach conventional significance ($p = 0.097$). All other category interaction terms were nonsignificant (all $p > 0.19$). This pattern tentatively suggests that influencer credibility carries less weight for the least-committed adopters, who may not yet have formed a stable parasocial relationship with a specific influencer, though this should be interpreted cautiously given the smaller subgroup size (n = 41) and should be treated as a direction for future confirmatory testing rather than a confirmed moderation effect.

5. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The findings collectively establish consumer trust as the focal psychological process connecting vegan influencer characteristics with behavioural outcomes. The differential mediation architecture (full mediation for all message paths and partial mediation for the credibility–purchase intention path) reveals that vegan influencer marketing operates through two simultaneous processing channels, an elaborative trust-building pathway shared by source and message characteristics, and a peripheral identity-matching pathway exclusive to source credibility in the purchase

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intention direction. This dual-channel model extends prior influencer marketing theory and identifies the conditions under which the identity heuristic activates direct purchase behaviour, bypassing deliberate trust assessment.

The near-equivalent predictive power of credibility, clarity, and strength (R^2 = 0.178, 0.172, 0.181) constitutes a departure from classical persuasion hierarchies that privilege source characteristics. In high-complexity, high-involvement food categories, message quality achieves parity with source quality in trust formation, an additive architecture with important implications for content strategy. This study systematically replicates and extends Source Credibility Theory in India's emerging vegan market context. It contributes to the internationalisation of influencer marketing theory. The findings demonstrate that trust mechanisms previously validated in Western consumer contexts also hold in culturally and institutionally distinct settings. Moreover, these mechanisms exhibit amplified effect sizes, which appear to be influenced by specific cultural moderators.

5.2. Practical Recommendations for Vegan Brands

Influencer identification should prioritise credibility indicators over follower counts. Partnerships with influencers demonstrating documented vegan lifestyle commitment, relevant expertise (nutrition certification, culinary education), and established community trust will yield higher behavioural benefits than collaborations with high-follower-count influencers lacking these credentials. Brands should invest in co-creating content that optimises message strength, providing influencers with product testing data, nutritional analyses, and third-party certification materials to enable evidence-based content development. Message clarity can be systematically improved by supplying influencers with structured content templates, logical information hierarchies, and standardised vegan terminology glossaries.

Measurement systems should centre on trust as the primary key performance indicator rather than immediate sales conversion. Since the overwhelming majority of pathways to behavioural outcomes are mediated fully by trust, monitoring trust-level shifts through sentiment analysis, engagement quality assessment, or direct audience surveys provides early signals of campaign effectiveness before behavioural metrics register. The finding that credibility produces a direct purchase effect (H4 partial mediation) suggests that investing in genuinely credible, long-tenured vegan influencers generates an additional conversion channel that bypasses the trust mediator entirely.

5.3. Implications for Influencers and Certification Bodies

For influencers, the results indicate that authenticity and transparency yield the highest trust returns in the vegan community. Timely and complete sponsorship disclosure, acknowledgement of product limitations, balanced reporting of both positive and negative testing experiences, and consistency between promoted products and personal lifestyle choices are all trust-building behaviours that generate downstream behavioural consequences. Influencers who maximise short-term commercial returns by endorsing products inconsistent with their vegan values risk eroding the trust base that makes their recommendations behaviour ally consequential.

For certification bodies, the finding that consumers systematically trust influencer recommendations over institutional labels is a strategic alarm. Certification organisations must invest in closing this trust communication gap, developing their own digital content strategies, partnering with credible influencers to communicate what certification means, and making certification information more accessible and comprehensible within the social media environments where vegan purchasing decisions are increasingly made. Three specific policy actions follow from the certification-proliferation problem identified in Section 2.4. First, certifiers should consolidate or cross-recognise overlapping standards where feasible, since a smaller number of well-differentiated marks is easier for consumers to evaluate than a crowded field of similarly named labels (Bhaskaran et al., 2006). Second, certification bodies should publish plain-language explanations of what each mark actually verifies, directly addressing the ambiguity that drives label scepticism (Cho & Taylor, 2020). Third, given the SDG 12 stakes discussed in Section 2.5, policymakers and industry associations have a shared interest in funding independent audits of certifier rigour, since responsible-

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consumption goals depend on consumers being able to distinguish credible sustainability signals from weak ones at the point of purchase.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations associated with the present findings. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; establishing temporal ordering of trust antecedents requires longitudinal data. While the spectrum-based sampling approach improves external validity across adoption stages, convenience sampling may limit generalisability beyond Coimbatore and Chennai. Platform and vegan-spectrum subgroup comparisons (Section 4.7) found no significant moderation of the hypothesized paths by primary platform (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook) or by vegan-spectrum category, with one partial exception: influencer credibility's effect on trust weakened to non-significance among Experimental adopters (n = 41), a pattern that warrants confirmatory testing in a larger subsample. TikTok, Twitter/X, and other platform users were too few in this sample (n = 32, 25, and 10, respectively) to support reliable subgroup comparison. Additionally, potentially important individual-difference moderators including vegan motivation (Health-*versus* ethically-*versus* environmentally-motivated), influencer following duration, and product subcategory (Food *versus* personal care *versus* fashion vegan products) were not modelled.

Future research should employ experimental designs with random assignment to influencer credibility and message quality conditions to establish causality. Longitudinal tracking of trust formation over multiple influencer–follower interaction cycles would clarify temporal dynamics. Cross-platform comparisons with adequately powered TikTok and Twitter/X subsamples could extend the present Instagram/YouTube/Facebook findings (Section 4.7.3) to identify whether these newer, more algorithmically-driven platforms produce differential trust architectures given their distinct content affordances. A confirmatory replication targeting Experimental-stage adopters specifically would help clarify whether the attenuated credibility-trust link observed in this subgroup (Section 4.7.4) reflects a genuine developmental pattern or a small-sample artifact. Moderating effects of micro- *versus* macro-influencer status (10K–100K *versus* 500K+ followers) and the operationalisation and empirical testing of perceived authenticity as a distinct dimension of meta-credibility warrant further investigation.

7. CONCLUSION

This study provides the first systematic empirical investigation of how social media influencer credibility and message characteristics drive consumer trust and behavioural outcomes in the Indian vegan food market and puts this trust architecture within the broader phenomenon of influencer recommendations outperforming institutional certifications in consumer decision-making. Across 412 vegan-spectrum consumers in Coimbatore and Chennai, all eleven hypotheses were supported. Influencer credibility, message clarity, and message strength significantly predict consumer trust, and trust serves as the primary mediating mechanism through which these antecedents translate into purchase intention and willingness to try vegan products.

The differential mediation architecture (full mediation for message-related paths and partial mediation for the credibility–purchase intention path) is the most novel theoretical contribution of the study, revealing a dual-channel processing model unique to ideologically invested consumer communities. This dual-channel finding extends both anchor theories rather than simply applying them: Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953) is extended by demonstrating that source credibility retains a direct behavioural effect even after trust is modelled, implying credibility operates partly as an identity heuristic rather than solely as a trust antecedent, a distinction the original theory does not draw. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) is extended by showing that, once message clarity and strength are set as separate constructs, their effects on behaviour run exclusively through trust with no residual direct path, indicating that in high-involvement, high-risk categories the central route culminates in trust rather than bypassing it, a boundary condition not specified in the model's original beauty- and lifestyle-category applications. The systematically larger effect sizes relative to Western benchmarks reflect both the nascent state of

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vegan influencer marketing in urban Tamil Nadu and the amplifying effect of India's communal trust culture on parasocial influencer relationships. These findings validate the theoretical utility of spectrum-based sampling strategies in vegan consumer research and extend Source Credibility Theory to an emerging market vegan context with important implications for global influencer marketing practice. Consumer trust is not merely an outcome of influencer interaction in the value-rich, ethically complex domain of vegan food consumption. It constitutes the primary mechanism through which influencer marketing influences behaviour.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants at the beginning of the questionnaire through a consent confirmation statement ("Yes, I confirm my willingness to participate"), which was provided electronically by respondents completing the online questionnaire and in writing by those completing the paper-based questionnaire. All data were anonymised to ensure participant confidentiality.
Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
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