

What Fosters Trust in Influencers? Insights from a Cross-Cultural Comparison

Abstract

This study aims to clarify what types of influencers are most trusted and how those factors that generate trust are related to one another in different countries and cultures. It contributes to understanding how cultural factors shape influencer trust formation and offers insights for incorporating cultural dimensions into international marketing strategies by comparing the three world largest markets, Japan, China, and the US. Our data revealed that in Japan, homophily and honesty builds trust of influencers, in China, knowledgeable influencers are trusted, and in the US, skill and persuasiveness have a critical role. Furthermore, the parasocial relationship—a unique dynamic interplay between influencers and consumers—functions differently across countries and does not necessarily lead directly to trust.

Key words: Influencer, Influencer Marketing, Trust, Cross-Cultural Dimension

7771 words

1. Introduction

Today, influencers possess significant power in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors in the digitalized global marketplace (Schouten et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2022). The global market size of influencer marketing is growing rapidly, reaching 33 billion USD in 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025; Statista, 2025). Despite the global expansion of the market, influencers themselves are embedded deeply in local cultural contexts (Pant, 2024). Consequently, firms aiming to expand across borders encounter difficulties in aligning influencers with local audiences. Tremendous struggles due to cultural differences cause serious mismatches between influencers and target audiences (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025; Statuspher, 2019). This highlights that the power of influencers does not operate uniformly across international markets and understanding how the power is generated in different cultural contexts can be essential for effective influencer marketing.

Where does a significant influential power over consumer behaviors come from? Prior studies have highlighted that trust in influencers extends beyond product endorsement, functioning as a multidimensional construct that encompasses perceived expertise, authenticity, and relational closeness with followers (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Within this multidimensional framework, factors which especially contribute to trust of influencers may vary in the global marketplace. For instance, Chinese consumers tend to put more

value on the amount of information provided in one post while American consumers tend to put emphasis on influencer's expertise (Muniyandi et al., 2024).

Because influencer marketing is becoming a dominant global advertising channel (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025; Statista, 2025), international brands and multinational corporations now need strategic guidance on selecting culturally appropriate influencers for their local promotion campaigns. Therefore, "How are different factors related to one another to generate trust of influencers in different country markets?" can be a critical research question to be asked here to formulate an effective international strategy in influencer marketing.

2. Theoretical Background

2-1 Theoretical Foundations of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is an emerging promotional strategy in which companies leverage individuals or groups with social influence to enhance brand awareness and stimulate purchase intentions through their unique follower networks, content creation capabilities, and credibility—forms of social capital that contribute to persuasive communication (Leung et al., 2022; Yan & Takahashi, 2025). In this context, influencers are distinguished from celebrities. While celebrities gain fame through institutionalized means such as sports or entertainment, influencers acquire the power by creating eye-catching contents on social media and building a follower base from scratch. Influencers

are perceived to be psychologically closer to consumers than traditional celebrities and tend to evaluate products from an everyday, consumer-oriented perspective. As a result, product or service reviews done by influencers are regarded as more consumer-centric, relatable, and credible (Schouten et al., 2019; Yan & Takahashi, 2025). Followers often feel a one-sided sense of intimacy toward influencers, a phenomenon referred to as a parasocial relationship (PSR) (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Yan & Takahashi, 2025). PSR is a concept derived from parasocial interaction (PSI) and refers to the socio-emotional connection between media figures and consumers (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSR is defined as a psychological phenomenon in which viewers, despite having no real acquaintance with the performer, feel intimacy and one-sided affection as if they were friends or acquaintances (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The prefix “para” originates from Greek, meaning “pseudo” or “quasi,” and “social” refers to interpersonal interaction. While a social relationship involves mutual interaction, a parasocial relationship refers to a one-sided relationship directed toward another person.

Once PSR is established, consumers tend to gain trust in influencers (Schouten et al., 2019). This trust subsequently enhances brand perception and purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016). In other words, PSR strengthens the endorsement effect (Giles, 2002; Horton & Wohl, 1956). There are three major factors that strengthen PSR: informational value, authenticity, and homophily (Liu & Zheng, 2024). When consumers perceive these elements in influencers, PSRs are developed and their effects are

enhanced. First, informational value refers to the extent to which the content shared by an influencer is perceived as useful to followers. By providing practical information or knowledge relevant to daily life, consumers recognize the informational value. Second, authenticity is based on the influencer's honesty and trustworthiness. When influencers engage in self-disclosure and are perceived as truthful and sincere, followers are less likely to perceive their messages as purely promotional and more likely to recognize the influencer's authenticity. Finally, homophily refers to the perceived similarity between the influencer and followers in terms of values, lifestyle, appearance, or other characteristics. By recognizing these homophily, followers develop a sense of closeness, which facilitates the formation of PSRs.

The factors that enhance PSRs are not limited to the three factors we mentioned. Cross-national comparative studies focusing on a single country have shown that the dominant factors influencing PSR formation vary across national cultures. According to Yan and Takahashi (2025), in Japan, trustworthiness, social attractiveness, and homophily are the primary determinants of PSR. In contrast, studies by Le et al. (2025) identified interactivity and expertise as the central factors in PSR formation in South Korea. Furthermore, a comparative study conducted by Schmid & Klimmt (2011) on Mexico and Germany demonstrated that although the factors forming PSR are similar in both countries, social attraction has a stronger effect in Mexico, while task attraction is more significant in Germany. These findings suggest that the relative importance of

factors that develop and enhance PSR may vary depending on the cultural and social context.

Trust is another critical element and the fundamental source of an influencer's persuasive power. Trust is defined as a psychological state characterized by the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another party's intentions or behavior (Liu & Zheng, 2024). Despite the intensive study of PSR and trust in influencer marketing, previous studies have not revealed the relationship between these two outcomes. More research is required on this important issue in the international marketplace to explore an effective influencer marketing method.

2-2 Cross-cultural Differences in Trust Toward Influencers

Previous studies show that national culture has a critical role in the building of intimate relationships between influencers and followers, as well as the types of influencers that consumers are influenced by.

To understand the power of national culture on influencer marketing, cultural dimensions have been examined (Kikumori et al., 2025; Muniyandi et al., 2024). The application of Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions is especially popular in previous studies, and Trompenaars (n.d.) and the GLOBE Project (House et al., 2004) are also widely used (Appendix 1). In addition, Hu et al. (2025) has empirically shown that cultural context significantly moderates how influencer characteristics, such as expertise or trustworthiness, affect consumer trust and purchase intention. For example,

Kikumori et al. (2025) show that consumers in collectivist cultures are more influenced by an influencer's follower numbers, whereas those in individualist cultures are less sensitive to follower counts. In this way, the existing cultural dimensions serve as an analytical framework for explaining how differences in culture and country affect trust of influencers and purchase intention of consumers.

In addition to PSR development, the factors shaping trust and purchase intention also differ across country and culture. Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, in high power distance cultures, the number of followers indicates power and is associated with a high level of expertise. In contrast, in low power distance cultures, a large number of followers doesn't necessarily express skill or expertise. The impact of the number of followers doesn't differ significantly between individualism and collectiveness, as in collective cultures, consumers respond both to a large number of followers and to smaller, close communities.

Previous studies show how the factors that make influencers trustworthy differ from country to country. Nanevi et al. (2022) compared social media influencers in the US and China, and found differences in the factors that consumers emphasized. Creativity, self-expression, and uniqueness stimulate purchase intention in American consumers, making influencer content that highlights these factors more effective. In contrast, Chinese influencers tend to present several products and detailed information at once, and consumers trust the amount of information. This reflects differences in

consumer culture and how each country places trust in products. Kikumori et al. (2025) demonstrated that, in Japan, cultural value orientation and follower count significantly shape purchase intention. Japanese consumers tend to respect authority and status, and Japan's masculine culture emphasizes achievement and success. Consequently, a large number of followers functions as both "social status" and "evidence of success", fostering trust and purchase intent.

The number of previous studies show that the factors driving trust in influencers may differ due to differences in national cultures. Therefore, these findings strongly suggest that multinational corporations should select and utilize culturally appropriate influencers when designing promotional campaigns for each market.

In fact, some promotion campaigns of influencer marketing succeeded because marketers understood each country's culture and values enough. For example, Coca-Cola conducted promotions by influencers that considered cultural values in each national market, which increased their Brand Love Score worldwide. Also, Shiseido appointed influencers based on their compatibility with the brand rather than just the number of followers. Appendix 2 provides an overview of success and unsuccess cases of influencer marketing in international markets.

It is obvious that the culture differs and the criteria of trusting influencers differ across countries. However, previous studies have paid limited attention to how different factors are related to one another to generate trust of influencers in different country

markets. Our research aims to expand the theoretical framework by reexamining the influencer trust generating process in a multicultural context and provide a guideline for designing culturally appropriate strategy in international marketing practice. Based on this, we set the following research question below.

RQ: What are the differences in the factors leading to trust and PSR of influencers by country, and how are these factors related to one another?

3. Methodology

Because influencer trust formation is a relatively new and evolving phenomenon, a mixed-methods design was necessary to capture emerging consumer perceptions qualitatively and to validate them quantitatively (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this section, to conduct theoretically meaningful international comparisons of influencer trust formation, we develop hypotheses based on prior studies and consumer interviews, and test them through a questionnaire survey.

3-1 Mixed Method

By integrating qualitative exploration with quantitative validation, we can enhance the explanatory power and practical applicability of the findings for global strategy (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Among the frameworks, exploratory sequential design was employed (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This method has the advantage of ensuring both theoretical validity and

practical applicability. We first identified culturally rooted trust factors through consumer interviews in each country and then validated and generalized these findings via surveys. This approach yields insights that are both culturally grounded and broadly applicable, which is critical for informing global influencer strategies.

3-2 Qualitative Data Analysis

To identify which aspects of influencers contribute to their credibility across different countries, we conducted semi-structured interviews with consumers.

3-2-1 Data Collection

Our focus was on individuals responsible for influencer casting in Japanese firms. Thus, we chose countries according to whether their markets are sufficiently valuable for Japanese multinationals.

To select appropriate countries for our study, we developed a matrix of countries using critical variables. The vertical axis indicates the market size of influencer marketing (Mordor Intelligence, n.d.), while the horizontal axis shows the increased number of local subsidiaries of Japanese companies over the two-year period from 2021 to 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Figure 1: Matrix for Country Selection



Source: Based on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.) and Mordor Intelligence (n.d.)

The vertical axis enables us to determine how active influencer marketing is in that country, and the horizontal axis enables us to judge how much attention Japanese companies have paid to that country's market's future potential. Based on these variables, we selected one country from the first, second, and fourth quadrants, respectively. Detailed reasons for selecting the three countries above are listed in Appendix 3.

The interviews targeted consumers in age 20s, regardless of the difference in types of products and services they are influenced by. This is because that age 20s group tend to spend more time on viewing and posting on social media online, that is the highest among all (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2024).

We defined influencers as “Individuals and groups who gained fame through their activities on social media”, and excluded K-POP idols and celebrities (Schouten et al., 2019). The interview was conducted via Zoom for about 30 minutes for each respondent. Depending on the subject’s nationality, we used both Japanese and English but the questions were all the same. Interview question list is listed in Appendix 4.

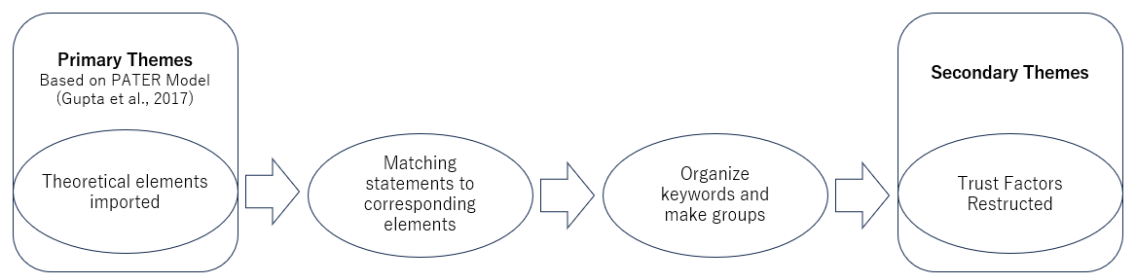
We applied the PATER model to conduct coding with our interview data (Gupta et al., 2017). The model comprises five dimensions—Popularity, Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, Expertise, and Relevance—representing key attributes in evaluating impressions of media personalities, including influencers. The model functions as a framework for structurally evaluating a person's impression and trustworthiness. Its validity is particularly high in contexts where expertise, brand relevance, and public image directly influence consumer trust, such as with influencers.

3-2-2 Data Analysis

We collected interview data from 45 consumers and were analyzed using a hybrid coding method. This coding method's strength lies in its ability to employ both deductive and inductive approaches (Au et al., 2023). In our study, theoretical elements concerning trust formation were extracted based on prior research, which we call primary themes, and then supplemented and restructured using statements derived from consumer interviews, leading to our secondary themes. The deductive coding was

guided by the PATER model (Gupta et al., 2017), which served as the theoretical framework for categorizing trust-related statements. This enabled the identification of trust structures grounded in practical contexts while ensuring theoretical validity. Furthermore, the extracted elements were utilized in designing survey items for the quantitative phase, contributing to the construction of an analytical framework for international comparison.

Figure 2: Hybrid Coding



Source: Based on Au et al.(2023)

The interview records were kept both through video recording and meeting minutes. We extracted statements related to trust and assigned them to the most relevant primary theme. For the primary theme that gathered many statements, we made further classifications within it. For example, Japanese consumer study received many statements about the honesty of influencers. However, it was different among people whether they trust people who honestly review the product or honestly tell their

weaknesses and negative aspects. Therefore, we additionally classified statements and made the secondary theme.

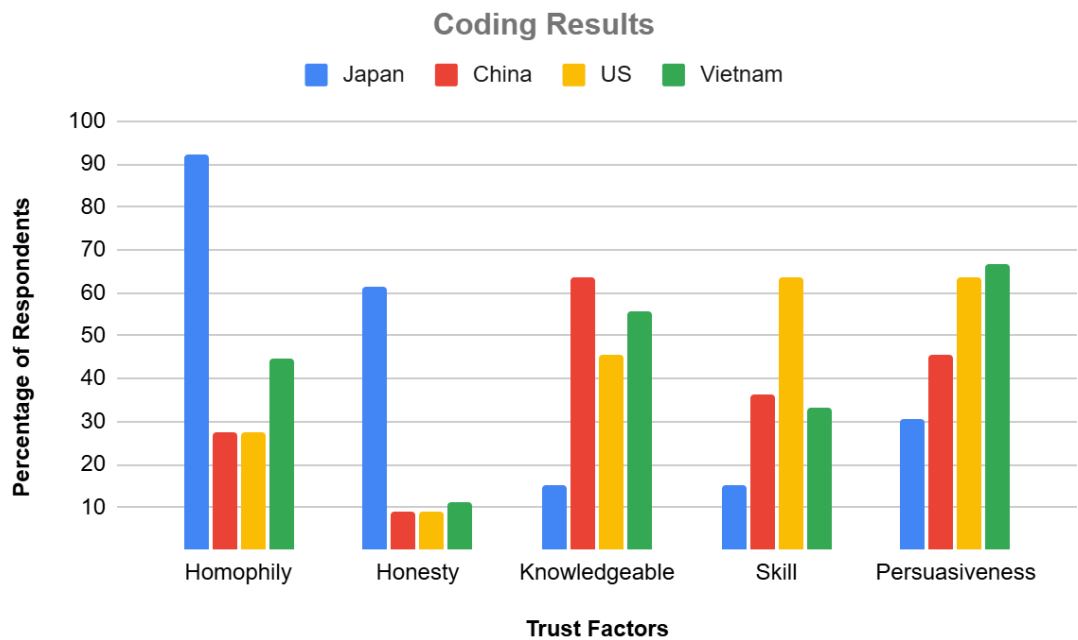
If the secondary theme received statements from more than 60% of all interviewees who participated in our research, we determined them as the main secondary theme of that country. This percentage is considered a valid benchmark for assessing thematic representativeness and saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2012). From the coding process, one to two main secondary themes per country have emerged. Our final coding results identified honesty and homophily for Japan, skill for the US, knowledgeable for China, and persuasiveness for Vietnam.

Table 1: Summary of Coded Consumer Interview Statements by Country

Secondary Theme	Primary Theme	Country(n)	Statements
Homophily	-	Japan(12)	People with similar physical characteristics Someone with many similarities to me Similar physical characteristics / opinions Having similarities with oneself
		China(3)	
		US(3)	
		Vietnam(4)	
Honesty	Honest	Japan(8)	Introducing both the pros and cons Showing both positive and negative aspects Introducing both the good and the bad aspects Being honest about the negative aspects
		China(1)	
		US(1)	
		Vietnam(1)	
Knowledgeable	Knowledgeable	Japan(2)	Well-versed in that genre Knowledge and expertise are important Can trust when it is the area of their expertise Providing detailed information about the product
		China(7)	
		US(5)	
		Vietnam(5)	
Skill	Convincing	Japan(2)	Skilled at editing High-quality content Carefully crafted angles and editing A well-crafted video
		China(4)	
		US(7)	
		Vietnam(3)	
Persuasiveness	Convincing	Japan(4)	Sharing experiences of using the product How it is presented in an interesting way Product introduction based on analysis That person themselves demonstrating the effect.
		China(5)	
		US(7)	
		Vietnam(6)	

Japan: n=13, China: n=11, US: n=11, Vietnam: n=9

Figure 3: Distribution of Consumer Interview Responses by Country



3-3 Hypothesis Development

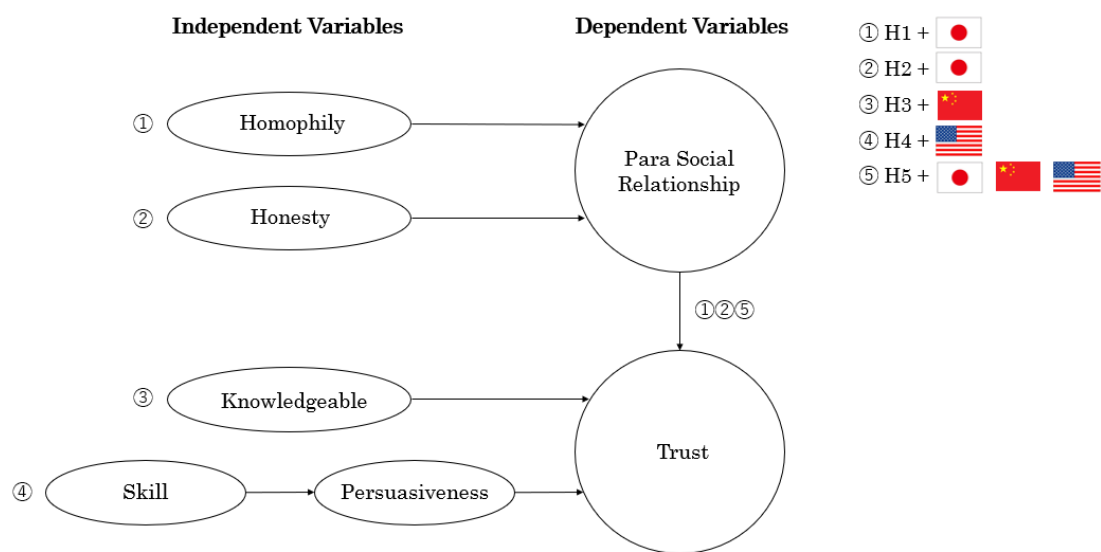
Our study applies a mixed methods approach to develop meaningful hypotheses in the field of influencer marketing. Our hypotheses are designed for conducting an international comparison to verify the power of influencers, thus based on our research question: What are the differences in the factors leading to trust and PSR of influencers by country, and how are these factors related to one another?

Previous studies revealed some critical factors that affect PSR development and trust building of influencers. For example, authenticity may have a positive impact on PSR in general (Liu & Zheng, 2024). However, cultural impacts have not received much

attention. In addition, trust toward influencers could be generated by the number of followers. This impact may vary from country to country.

In our study, we focus on three major markets, Japan, the US, and China. Although we conducted consumer interviews in Vietnam, we dropped Vietnam for further subject to investigate for the following reasons: 1) China and the US have the world largest market in size; 2) In Hofsted’s (2011) cultural dimensions, China and Vietnam are similar, making it reasonable to treat both countries as a single unit for analysis; 3) Based on our consumer interviews, the patterns observed in China and Vietnam were largely consistent. Thus, it is reasonable to examine both countries within a single analytical framework. In sum, based on previous studies and insights obtained from consumer interviews, five hypotheses were developed for three country markets.

Figure 4: Conceptual Framework for this study



According to Kikumori et al. (2025), in Japan, which has a high-power distance culture and masculinity, a large number of followers lead to trust toward influencers. However, as a result of qualitative study, only about 46% of interviewees mentioned the number of followers as a factor that contributes to trust, revealing that the number of followers doesn't have much effect on Japanese consumers. As a result of a qualitative study conducted on Japanese consumers, about 90% of interviewees mentioned that the influencers they trust "share similar sensibility and physical traits with consumers". It suggests that Japanese consumers tend to generate their trust in influencers when they feel homophily with influencers. Furthermore, in a same study, about 60% of interviewees said that the influencers they trust "comment on both the pros and cons of the product." It suggests that Japanese consumers tend to trust influencers when they feel their reviews are honest. Previous studies also suggest that in Japan, trustworthiness, social attractiveness, and homophily are the primary factors of PSR (Yan & Takahashi, 2025). Various factors have been mentioned as determining PSR, but the qualitative study revealed that, especially for Japanese consumers, homophily and the honesty of reviews has the strongest factors on PSR development. Thus, homophily and honesty are thought to mediate PSR. Therefore, H1 and H2 were constructed.

H1: For Japanese consumers, homophily has a higher positive impact on PSR and trust than other factors.

H2: For Japanese consumers, honesty of reviews has a higher positive impact on PSR and trust than other factors.

Previous study has reported that Chinese consumers tend to show a positive attitude to influencers who present a variety of products and detailed information (Nanevi et al., 2022). While emphasizing the amount of information, it has been found that in collectivist countries like China, consumers tend to trust by perceiving homophily, suggesting that homophily also affects trust (Leonhardt et al., 2020). As a result of a qualitative study conducted on Chinese consumers, about 60% of interviewees mentioned that the influencers they trust are “a knowledgeable person”, which was consistent with previous study. However, about 30% of consumers mentioned a sense of homophily. These results suggest that Chinese consumers tend to trust influencers when they perceive the influencers as knowledgeable. Therefore, H3 was constructed.

H3: For Chinese consumers, knowledgeable influencers have a higher positive impact on trust than other factors.

Previous study has reported that the creativity, self-expressions, and uniqueness of influencers encourage purchase intention among American consumers (Nanevi et al., 2022). Also, cultural research shows that people in individualistic cultures, such as the US, focus more on personal capabilities when they judge professionals (Torelli et al., 2014). As a result of a qualitative study conducted on American consumers, about 60% of them mentioned that the influencers they trust “deliver contents with good

quality and editing”. They praised the aspect that conveyed the attitude of “taking time to create something good”. As mentioned in previous studies, it has been shown that in the US, influencers’ skill has a strong impact. Importantly, within those who emphasized influencers’ skills, about half of them additionally noted that “high-quality or longer videos allow them to understand the product detail, making the influencer more trustworthy”. This suggests that they may perceive the skill as a cue that enhances the persuasiveness of communication. Furthermore, about 60% of interviewees mentioned that the influencers they trust “deliver detailed explanations backed by research, making them convincing”. Although not discussed in previous studies, a qualitative study revealed that they tend to trust influencers whose communication style is persuasive. In other words, it is thought that American consumers tend to feel persuasiveness by the skill of influencers and form trust. Therefore, H4 was constructed.

H4: For American consumers, the skill of influencers has a higher positive impact on trust through persuasiveness than other factors.

According to Schouten et al. (2019), once PSR is established, consumers tend to gain trust in influencers. However, this is mentioned as a matter of course and has not been demonstrated. In our interviews, consumers mentioned factors such as the homophily and the honesty of reviews as factors of trust, and these were closely related to the formation factors of PSR. In other words, as discussed in the hypothesis construction of H1 and H2, it is reasonable to consider the process in which homophily

enhances PSR, and PSR, in turn, leads to trust. Therefore, PSR is considered to have a positive impact on the formation of trust, and the following hypothesis is proposed.

H5: PSR has a positive impact on trust of influencers in all three country markets.

3-4 Quantitative Data Analysis

In this section, a quantitative survey was conducted based on questionnaires administered to Japanese, American and Chinese consumers to test five hypotheses developed.

3-4-1 Sampling

In this study, we examined five hypotheses to investigate how the factors that lead individuals to trust influencers differ across countries. We selected Japanese, American, and Chinese aged 18 to 29 as the participants. The survey focused on the participants who are influenced by influencers in the cosmetics and fashion product domains. According to our consumer interviews, it revealed that the factors contributing to influencer trust vary depending on the product domain. The cosmetics and fashion products were chosen for our study because influencer marketing is particularly active in these two categories in the global marketplace in general (Statista, 2025). The rationale for selecting the target countries and age group is described in the section on consumer interviews.

Table 2: Sample Descriptions

	Period	Method	Sample Size (*)	Detail
Japan	2025/10/22~2025/11/20	Online survey on Google Forms	280 (375)	Male: 132 (47%) Female: 147 (52.5%) Not Declared: 1
China	2025/10/24~2025/11/20	Online survey on Google Forms	82 (125)	Male: 35 (42.7%) Female: 46 (56.1%) Not Declared: 1
US	2025/10/21~2025/11/20	Online survey on Google Forms	94 (146)	Male: 25 (26.6%) Female: 80 (%) Not Declared: 7

*The actual number of response received

In this study, participants from three countries were asked to respond to the measurement items we developed. All items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "absolutely disagree (1)" to "totally agree (5)". Based on the study done by Lee et al. (2002), which compared responses to four-, five-, and seven-point Likert scales across different cultural groups, the five-point scale was determined to be the most effective for the target countries.

To conduct an international comparison across three major country markets, questionnaires were prepared in three languages: Japanese, English, and Chinese, respectively. To ensure the accuracy of each questionnaire, the back-translation method was employed (Usunier, 1998). This process involved the use of generative AI, as well as two native speakers of English and Japanese and two native speakers of Chinese and Japanese.

The measurement items used in this study consist of six variables: “Trust,” “Parasocial Relationship,” “Knowledgeable,” “Honesty,” “Homophily,” “Skill,” and “Persuasiveness.” All six variables are measured with valid items that were developed and applied in previous studies. We listed all measurement items in Table 3.

Table 3: Measurement Items

Constructs (Secondary Theme)	Label	Measurement Items	References
Trust (TRST)	trst1	This influencer meets my expectations.	Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003)
	trst2	This influencer never disappoints me.	
	trst3	I feel confident in this influencer's information.	
	trst4	Influencer's content delivers satisfaction I expect.	
Para Social Relationship (PSR)	psr1	I feel a sense of familiarity with that influencer.	Yan & Takahashi (2024)
	psr2	If there was a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would be interested and read it.	
	psr3	The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as I am with friends.	
	psr4	I would like to interact with the influencer in social media.	
Homophily (HMPL)	hmpl1	This influencer shares similar values to mine.	Lee & Watkins (2016)
	hmpl2	I can relate to this influencer	
	hmpl3	This influencer's way of thinking aligns with my own.	
	hmpl4	I feel I have a lot in common with this influencer.	
Honesty (HNST)	hnst1	I feel this review is not hiding anything.	Morhart et al. (2015): Audrezet et al. (2020)
	hnst2	I feel this influencer's review is written with sincerity.	
	hnst3	The influencer's posts are based on facts.	
	hnst4	The influencer does not exaggerate product benefits	
Knowledgeable (KLDG)	kldg1	This influencer is knowledgeable in that field	Bansal & Voyer (2000)
	kldg2	This influencer has a solid understanding of their field	
	kldg3	This person's expertise is solid	
Persuasiveness (PERS)	pers1	This influencer's post is persuasive	Rodrigues et al. (2024)
	pers2	This influencer's argument makes sense.	
	pers3	This influencer's recommendations are convincing.	
Skill (SKL)	skl1	This influencer consistently delivers high-quality content.	Ryu & Han (2021)
	skl2	This influencer puts in a lot of effort to create appealing content.	
	skl3	I feel this influencer's videos and posts are well-edited	

3-4-2 Sample Reliability and Validity Assessments

To evaluate the measurement quality of the constructs, both reliability and validity were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (Hair et al., 2019). SPSS Statistics (Ver. 30.0.0.0) and AMOS (Ver. 30.0.0) were used. As a preliminary analysis,

gender was included as a control variable in the regression models. The results showed that all p-values exceeded 0.50, indicating no significant influence of gender on the main outcomes (Hair et al., 2019). Having confirmed that gender did not significantly affect the constructs, we then proceeded to evaluate their measurement quality. Internal consistency was examined through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). All constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.70 to 0.88 and CR values exceeding Hair et al.'s (2019) recommended threshold of 0.70.

Convergent validity was established by inspecting standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Almost all standardized factor loadings were above 0.50, and AVE values ranged between 0.31 to 0.70. Two constructs, trust and PSR, fell behind the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Although trust did not meet the benchmark, both Cronbach's α and CR exceeded the benchmark values, confirming sufficient validity (Hair et al., 2019). Meanwhile, PSR had factor loadings exceeding 0.50 for all items except one, and Cronbach's α was within an acceptable range. However, AVE and CR did not meet the recommended standards. Although it does not fully meet the criteria, it was judged to be theoretically important and thus valid for inclusion in the analysis. However, there are limitations to the reliability of the measurement, and this point should be addressed for improvement in future research.

Table 4: Sample Reliability and Validity Assessments for Japan

Constructs (Secondary Theme)	Measurement Items	Standardized Factor Loading	Average Value	AVE	Cronbach α	CR
Trust (TRST)	trst1	0.70	3.4	0.42	0.72	0.74
	trst2	0.43				
	trst3	0.74				
	trst4	0.68				
Para Social Relationship (PSR)	psr1	0.53	3.0	0.31	0.70	0.64
	psr2	0.60				
	psr3	0.60				
	psr4	0.49				
Homophily (HMPL)	hmpl1	0.75	3.0	0.54	0.83	0.83
	hmpl2	0.76				
	hmpl3	0.80				
	hmpl4	0.64				
Honesty (HNST)	hnst1	0.80	3.3	0.66	0.88	0.89
	hnst2	0.89				
	hnst3	0.81				
	hnst4	0.75				
Persuasiveness (PERS)	pers1	0.81	3.6	0.70	0.88	0.87
	pers2	0.88				
	pers3	0.81				

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) recommended by Henseler et al. (2015). The highest HTMT value was 0.74, which is below the threshold of 0.85, supporting the discriminant validity.

Table 5: HTMT Correlation for Japan

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Trust					
2 PSR	0.56				
3 Homophily	0.41	0.63			
4 Honest	0.70	0.45	0.34		
5 Persuasive	0.72	0.45	0.26	0.74	

The same steps were taken for China and America to evaluate the measurement quality of the constructs.

For China, it was clear that gender had no influence on the results, since the p-values were 0.45 and 0.56. Although PSR's AVE fell behind the recommended threshold, both Cronbach's α and CR exceeded the benchmark values, confirming sufficient validity (Hair et al., 2019). For America, it was also clear that gender had no influence on the results, since the p-values were 0.41 and 0.96. All constructs met the recommended threshold. Detailed results are listed in Appendix 5 to 8.

4. Analysis and Results

For each country, we tested the proposed hypotheses on AMOS (Ver. 30.0.0) and subsequently refined the model based on the result of multiple regression analysis and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS Statistics (Ver. 30.0.0.0) . All results are summarized in table 6.

Table 6: Summary of Hypothesis Testing and Model Refinement Results by Country

Country	Model	Standardized Estimates (β)	X ²	CFI	RMSEA	p
Japan	HMPL→PSR	0.54	329.2	0.88	0.09	***
	HNST→PSR	0.50				***
	PSR→TRST	0.69				***
	HMPL→PSR	0.64	379.2	0.91	0.08	***
	PSR→TRST	0.29				***
	HNST→PERS	0.77				***
	PERS→TRST	0.75				***
China	KLDG→TRST	0.41	84.8	0.90	0.11	**
	PSR→TRST	0.60				***
	HMPL→PSR	0.80	276.4	0.84	0.12	***
	PSR→TRST	0.40				**
	KLDG→PERS	0.80				***
	PERS→TRST	0.72				***
US	SKL→PERS	0.82	201.1	0.86	0.135	***
	PERS→TRST	0.74				***
	PSR→TRST	0.27				**
	SKL→PERS	0.82	242.8	0.91	0.09	***
	PERS→TRST	0.84				***
	TRST→HMPL	0.74				***
	HMPL→PSR	0.76				***

Note: ***p<.001, **p<0.1, *p<0.5

The following sections evaluate our hypotheses sequentially.

First, H1 and H2 were tested using the model for Japan. The results indicate that both homophily ($\beta=0.54$, $p<0.001$) and honesty ($\beta=0.50$, $p<0.001$) has a positive impact on PSR (para social relationship), fostering trust ($\beta=0.69$, $p<0.001$). Therefore, H1 and H2 were all supported.

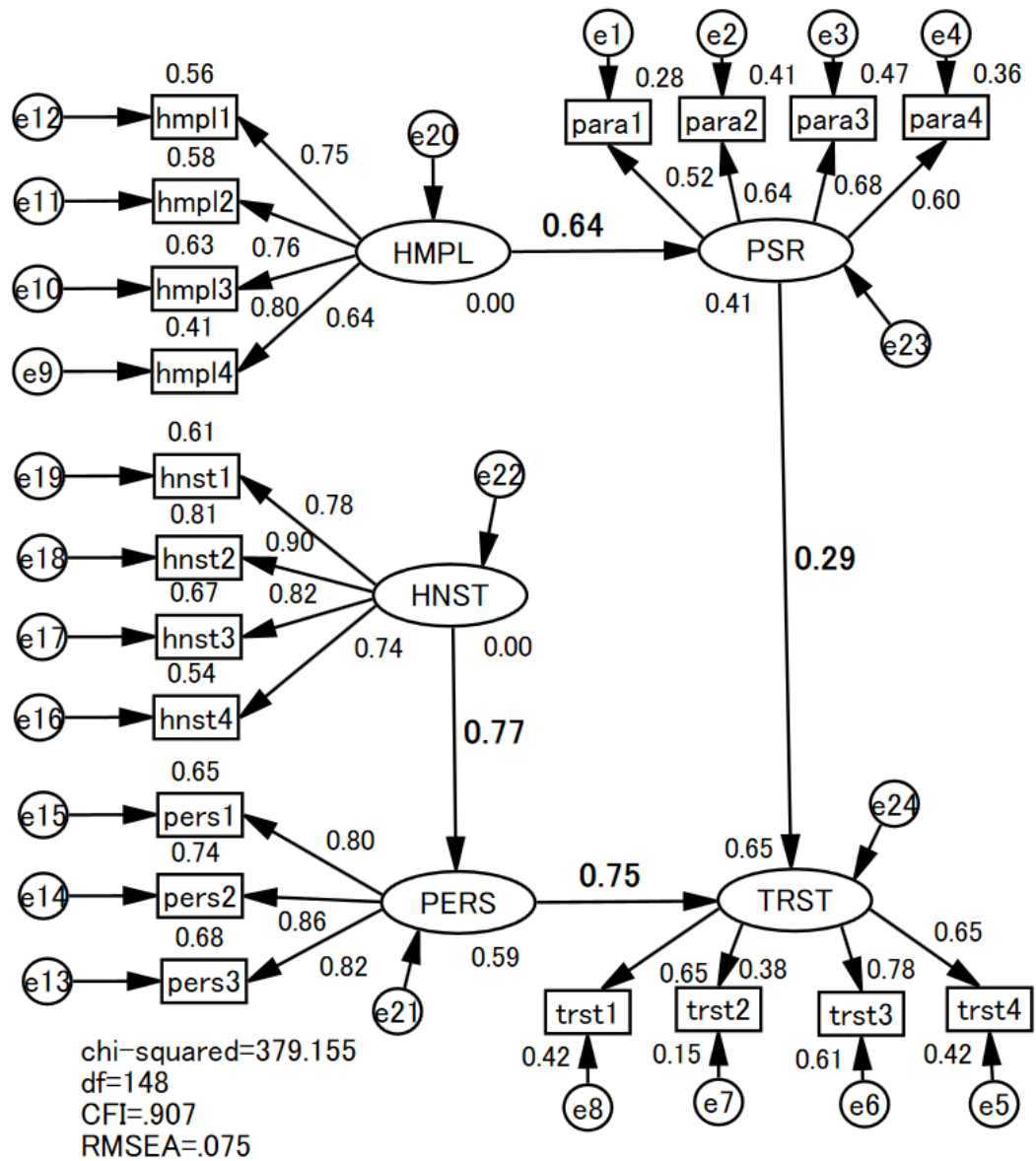
Secondly, H3 was tested using the model for China. The results show that the *Influencer Knowledge* has a positive impact on trust among Chinese consumers ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3 was supported.

H4 was tested using the model for the US. The results reveal that the skill of influencers has a positive impact on persuasiveness ($\beta=0.82$, $p<0.001$), which in turn strongly influences trust ($\beta=0.82$, $p<0.001$). Therefore, H4 was supported.

Finally, H5 was examined using the models for Japan, China, and the US. Among Japanese ($\beta = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$) and Chinese consumers ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), PSR positively affects trust, supporting H5 in both countries. However, among American consumers, PSR showed no significant effect on trust. Instead, the path from trust to homophily ($\beta = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$), and from homophily to PSR ($\beta = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$) was significant. Therefore, H5 was supported in Japan and China, but not in the United States.

Results of Japanese consumer

Figure 5: Path Diagram of Japan



For Japan, the results indicate that H1, H2, and H5 were all supported.

However, since the model did not meet the cutoff criteria for CFI and RMSEA suggested by Hu & Bentler (1999) and MacCallum et al. (1996), we refined the model by incorporating modifications based on the results of EFA.

After testing various alternatives, we found that honesty significantly mediated persuasiveness ($\beta=0.77$, $p<0.001$), leading to trust ($\beta=0.75$, $p<0.001$). This model's CFI was 0.907 and RMSEA was 0.075, both approaching the recommended cutoff criteria. Therefore, in Japan, honesty has the greatest impact on trust in influencers through persuasiveness.

Results for Chinese consumers

For China, the results indicate that H3 and H5 were supported. The path diagram is listed in Appendix 9.

However, the model comparison indicated that the alternative models-inducing *Homophily* \rightarrow *PSR* \rightarrow *Trust* and *Knowledgeable* \rightarrow *Persuasiveness* \rightarrow *Trust* demonstrated a better overall model fit (CFI = 0.841, RMSEA = 0.117). First, it was revealed that *Homophily* strongly and positively influences *PSR* ($\beta = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, the path from *Knowledgeable* to *Persuasiveness* ($\beta = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$), as well as the path from *Persuasiveness* to *Trust* ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), were particularly strong. These findings imply that for Chinese consumers, *Knowledgeable*, mediated through *Persuasiveness*, has the greatest impact on trust toward influencers. Regarding the results for China, the model fitness didn't meet the standard, but the value was fairly close to the threshold. Therefore, increasing the sample size is necessary to improve fitness, which is the limitation of this study.

Results of American Consumers

For the US, the results indicate that H4 was supported and H5 wasn't supported.

The path diagram is listed in Appendix 10.

However, the model comparison indicated that the alternative model incorporating the path Trust \rightarrow Homophily \rightarrow PSR demonstrated a better model fit (CFI = 0.907, RMSEA = 0.095). First, Trust was found to have a strong positive effect on Homophily ($\beta = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$), and Homophily was found to strongly influence PSR ($\beta = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that, in the United States, trust serves as a precursor to the formation of PSR.

5 Discussion and Implications

Our study compared and verified the relationship between factors forming trust toward influencers in Japan, China, and the US. Results and implications for each country are listed in Appendix 11. From our findings, we found that “persuasiveness” functions as a mediating factor in the trust-forming process across all three countries. However, the sources generating persuasiveness and the relationship between PSR and trust differed by country. These differences in the power of influencers were shown to be closely related to cultural backgrounds.

There were two main findings; 1) the factors contributing to trust formation interact with each other in different ways across countries, and 2) the relationship between PSR and trust also varies depending on cultural context.

In previous studies, some critical factors have been treated individually in analysis, such as homophily, honesty of the review, the amount of knowledge, the skill, and persuasiveness of influencers. However, our study revealed those factors that generate the power of influencers actually interact with each other in trust formation, as well as generating PSR. Especially, honesty, the amount of knowledge, and the skill indirectly affected trust by enhancing the persuasiveness of posts and statements. Characteristics like these are simply considered as their strengths or unique personality. Consumers rely on these cues to assess the reasonableness and trustworthiness of information, and only after this evaluation do they decide to trust influencers. In contrast, homophily, including psychological elements that foster a sense of closeness to oneself, can be interpreted as forming trust through PSR. Thus, trust formation is not explained by a single factor. Instead, it is a multi-layered process where capability-related and psychological factors are integrated step-by-step.

The strong association between PSR and trust in Japan is thought to stem from the cultural characteristic of in-group-oriented trust formation. Here, the in-group refers to intimate relationships such as family, friends, and the workplace, and in Japan, trust often tends to be limited to these relationships (Hayashi, 2021). Consequently, influencers, who should belong to out-groups, are often perceived as belonging to in-groups through the development of PSR, making it easier for building trust after. In other words, PSR may serve to extend the framework of Japanese “in-group trust.”

In China, the direct link between PSR and trust is also related to cultural characteristics rooted in unique trust relationships based on close ties (Chen & Chen, 2004). PSR is a psychological mechanism that leads people to perceive influencers as “entities with close relationships,” which directly contributes to trust formation.

Meanwhile, in the US, the opposite association was found where trust led to PSR mediating homophily. In the US, trust in strangers and society as a whole tends to be high, and intimacy is not a prerequisite for trust as it is in Japan or China (Putnam, 2000). Meanwhile, prior research has shown that trust and credibility in influencers strengthen homophily, which leads to PSR. American consumers strongly value alignment with “authentic self” and “self-expression” (Wasike, 2025), making them more likely to identify trustworthy influencers as “people who share their values” which in turn strengthens homophily.

Our study provides some theoretical and practical implications. First, regarding theoretical implications. The novelty of this study lies in its multinational comparison across Japan, China, and the US, revealing differences in PSR and trust formation of influencers. Additionally, we discussed relationships of identified factors that affect PSR and trust developments that had not been examined in previous studies. We also analyzed the causal relationship between PSR and trust. Furthermore, in terms of cultural dimensions, it has become clear that the relationship between PSR and trust differs. In collectivist countries like Japan and China, PSR builds trust, whereas in

individualist countries like the US, trust builds PSR. These findings provide a foundation for understanding influencer acceptance and trust formation from an international perspective, offering new insights that fill gaps in previous studies.

We also provide practical implications for multinational corporations. Because influencers are inherently domestic in nature, and they are tied to local communities and cultural contexts, employing influencers who are trusted within each local cultural context should be effective in markets with differing values. The culturally based selection criteria identified in this study can be utilized as a critical indicator when firms enter foreign markets, helping prevent “mismatches” between proposed values by companies and strength of influencers in each country's market.

6. Conclusion

Our study shows that factors affecting trust of influencers vary significantly across countries related to national cultures, requiring multinational companies to consider these differences when selecting influencers in foreign markets. While previous studies have conducted international comparisons, none of them have done a comparative study between Japan and other countries using the same constructs and metrics, nor has there been systematic discussion on the relationships between factors affecting trust. While the positive relationship between trust and PSR is often assumed, it has not been sufficiently examined in previous studies. To answer our research

question, “What are the differences in the factors leading to trust and PSR of influencers by country, and how are these factors related to one another?”, we found overall that relationships between the factors that generate trust of influencers, as well as variations in the relationship between PSR and trust for each country's market. These findings highlight the novelty of this study.

This study has limitations and that leads to future research direction. First, due to a limited sample size for the US and Chinese respondents, the model fitness was not fully acceptable especially for Chinese study. Second, the comparison is limited to only the US and Asia, and it can only be compared using a limited set of cultural dimension indicators. These limitations of this study serve as prospects for future research.

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Appendix 1: Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's Cultural Dimension	Power Distance	Whether people accept power inequality in society or not.
	Uncertainty Avoidance	The strength of society's anxiety about the unknown and future uncertainty.
	Individualism vs Collectiveness	Whether an individual is connected to society or a group.
	Masculinity vs Femininity	Differences in social roles and values based on gender.
	Long Term vs Short Term Orientation	Whether people's values are focused on the future or the present and past.
Trompenaars' Cultural Dimensions	Indulgence vs Restraint	The extent to which people's basic needs and pleasures are satisfied.
	Universalism vs particularism	Value rules and laws, or believe in chance.
	Individualism vs Communitarianism	Value individuality or collectivism.
	Specific vs Diffuse	Separate work and private or not.
	Neutral vs Emotional	Emphasize expressing emotions or controlling them.
	Achievement vs Ascription	Focus on the results of actions or on the individual themselves.
	Attitudes to time	View time as linear or as continuous and interrelated.
	Attitudes to the environment	Control nature and the environment or not.
	Performance Orientation	How much society values achievements and success.
	Assertiveness	The degree of self-assertion in society.
GLOBE Project	Future Orientation	The extent to which individuals plan and invest for the future.
	Human Orientation	The extent to which a society values compassion and fairness.
	Institutional Collectivism	How much a society values the interests of the group.
	In-Group Collectivism	The extent of collectivism within organizations and families.
	Gender Egalitarianism	The degree of gender inequality in society.
	Power Distance	How much power inequality is accepted in society.
	Uncertainty Avoidance	Society's tolerance for uncertainty.

Source: Hofstede (2011): Trompenaars (n.d.): House et al.(2004)

Appendix 2: Success and Unsuccessful Cases

	Content	Cause	Result
Successful Case 1 Coca-Cola	In the MENA region, Coca-Cola launched the “#OpenUp” campaign during Ramadan, with local influencers posting videos discussing family conflict.	Generating empathy by considering and respecting cultural values and leveraging trust in local influencers.	Brand Love Score increased by 42%
Successful Case 2 Nature Siberica	The Tunisian cosmetics brand “Natura Siberica” used the popular local influencer Yousr Ferjani and developed content focusing on the unboxing experience.	Focusing on the compatibility between her lifestyle and values and the brand, building trust through a “friendly tone of communication.”	Instagram Reels have 1.7 million views. Increase in brand awareness.
Successful Case 3 Shiseido	Shiseido used the VIT score to select influencers(e.g. Hunter Schafer).	Focusing on compatibility with the brand over the number of followers.	Increased the VIT score by 54%. One of Hunter's posts recorded an engagement rate of 47%.
Successful Case 4 Mother's Kitchen	Mother's Kitchen promoted its value in India mainly through Instagram Reels and Stories.	Using experts, macro, and micro-influencers to achieve both awareness and trust.	Achieved approximately 250,000 impressions
Unsuccessful Case Volvo	In the United States, a popular influencer in the fashion and beauty fields promoted Volvo's environmentally friendly car cleaner.	Due to the contradiction with her usual luxurious lifestyle, followers perceived it as “hypocritical”.	The focus was on influencers, and the purpose of sponsorship was lost.

Source: Based on Belaid & Yurdabak (2025): Crestline (2025): Shorty awards (2025):

Statusphere(2019) : Traackr (2023)

Appendix 3: Reasons for Selecting the Three Countries from the Matrix

Country	Reason for Selection
China	Influencer Marketing size is relatively small, but it is the largest market Japanese companies focus on
US	Influencer marketing is highly active; number of Japanese subsidiaries is overwhelming; despite slower growth, still one of the most important markets
Vietnam	Influencer marketing is active; number of subsidiaries is increasing; performance outlook for Japanese companies has improved significantly

Appendix 4: Consumer Interview Questions and Objectives

	Question	Objective
1	Have you ever bought products based on an influencer's recommendation?	To clarify whether consumers have purchased products based on influencers' recommendations.
2	What kind of feelings or perceptions did you have towards the influencer that led you to purchase the product?	To understand the feelings or perceptions consumers have toward the influencer at the time of purchase.
3	Of the all elements you brought up, which one do you think mattered the most, what aspects of the influencer do you feel that way?	To identify which factors most strongly influenced consumers' purchase intentions.
4	Are there any elements you think are important for followers to buy the product introduced or promoted?	To clarify which factors most strongly influenced consumers' purchase intentions, and how they perceived those factors in the influencer.
5	Among the influencers you follow, what do you think sets apart those who strongly influence you from those who don't?	To identify the characteristics of influencers that affect consumers.

Appendix 5: Sample Reliability and Validity Assessments for China

Secondary Theme	Measurement Items	Standardized Factor Loading	Average Value	AVE	Cronbach α	CR
Trust (TRST)	trst1	0.72	2.8	0.51	0.82	0.80
	trst2	0.41				
	trst3	0.79				
	trst4	0.87				
Para Social Relationship (PSR)	psr1	0.70	2.6	0.42	0.73	0.73
	psr2	0.60				
	psr3	0.78				
	psr4	0.45				
Homophily (HMPL)	hmpl1	0.78	2.7	0.61	0.85	0.86
	hmpl2	0.84				
	hmpl3	0.84				
	hmpl4	0.65				
Knowledge (KJDG)	kldg1	0.66	3.3	0.66	0.86	0.87
	kldg2	0.87				
	kldg3	0.93				
Persuasiveness (PERS)	pers1	0.89	3.2	0.70	0.86	0.87
	pers2	0.75				
	pers3	0.86				

Appendix 6: HTMT Correlation for China

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Trust					
2 PSR	0.68				
3 Homophily	0.74	0.79			
4 Knowledge	0.63	0.58	0.64		
5 Persuasive	0.85	0.70	0.68	0.83	

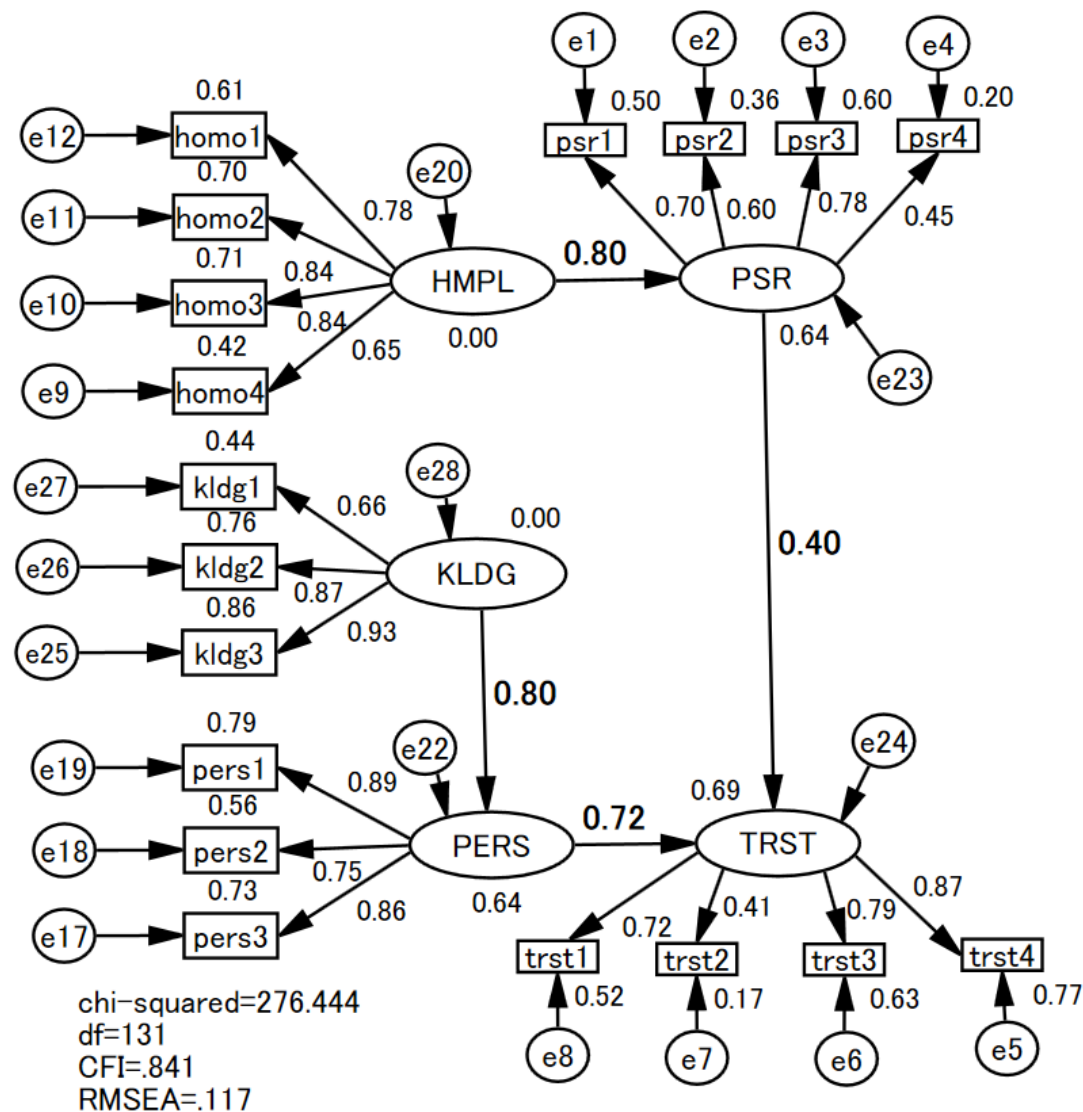
Appendix 7: Sample Reliability and Validity Assessments for America

Secondary Theme	Measurement Items	Standardized Factor Loading	Average Value	AVE	Cronbach α	CR
Trust (TRST)	trst1	0.70	3.4	0.63	0.87	0.87
	trst2	0.84				
	trst3	0.88				
	trst4	0.74				
Para Social Relationship (PSR)	psr1	0.72	3.1	0.56	0.83	0.83
	psr2	0.58				
	psr3	0.92				
	psr4	0.73				
Homophily (HMPL)	hmpl1	0.81	3.2	0.70	0.90	0.90
	hmpl2	0.85				
	hmpl3	0.91				
	hmpl4	0.77				
Persuasiveness (PERS)	pers1	0.59	3.7	0.63	0.82	0.82
	pers2	0.84				
	pers3	0.91				
Skill (SKL)	skl1	0.84	4.0	0.75	0.89	0.90
	skl2	0.91				
	skl3	0.85				

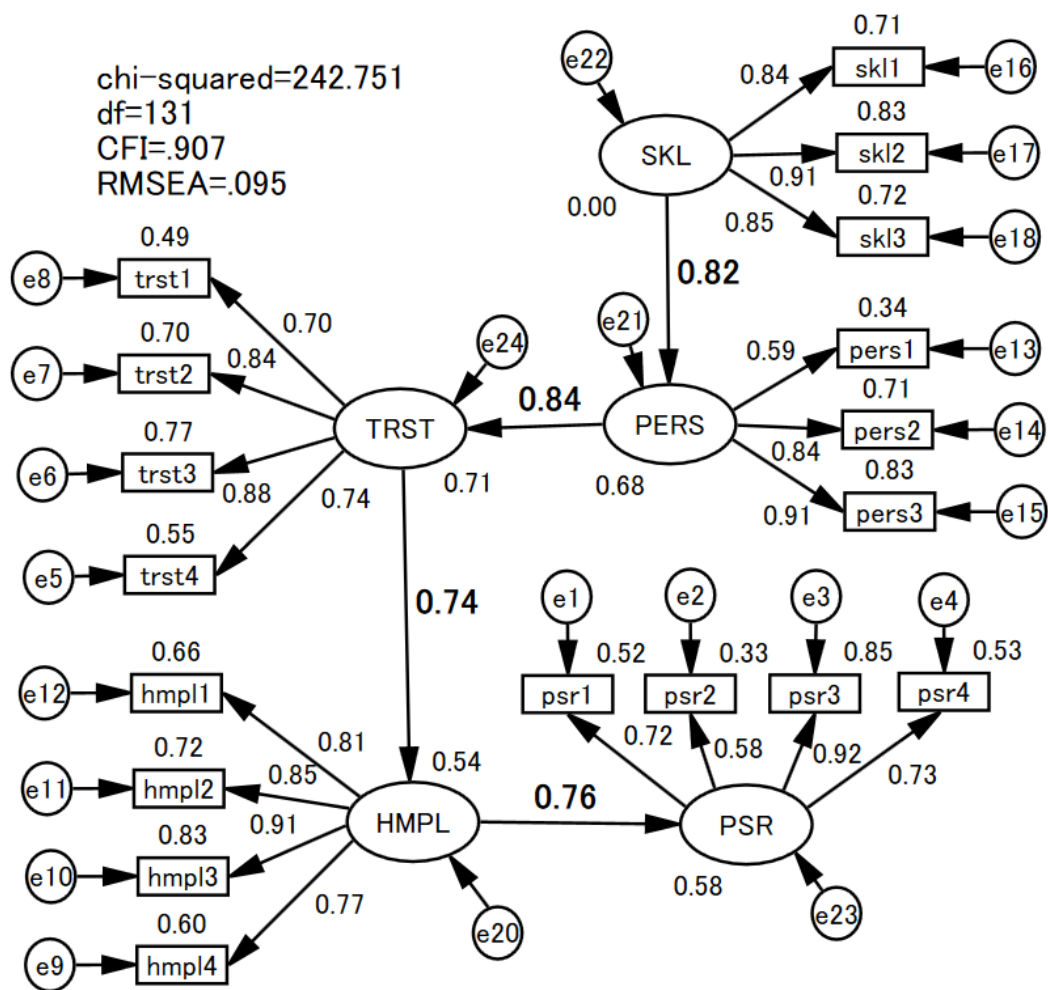
Appendix 8: HTMT Correlation for America

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Trust					
2 PSR	0.63				
3 Homophily	0.70	0.76			
4 Persuasive	0.79	0.75	0.72		
5 Skill	0.74	0.54	0.56	0.78	

Appendix 9: Path Diagram of China



Appendix 10: Path Diagram of the US



Appendix 11: Results and Implications of Each Countries

Country	Finding 1	Finding 2
	HMPL→PSR→TRST	HNST→PERS→TRST
Japan	In-group oriented collectivist culture in Japan (Hayashi, 2021: Yan & Takahashi, 2025)	Trust limited to in-groups, built on honesty (Hayashi, 2021: Harbour, 2024)
	HMPL→PSR→TRST	KLDG→PERS→TRST
China	Collectivist culture values relational closeness and identification (Hofstede, 2011: Luo, 2012)	Trust develops through long-term relational processes, not short-term facts (Luo, 2012: Muniyandi et al., 2024)
	SKL→PERS→TRST	TRST→HMPL→PSR
US	Individualistic cultures emphasize personal capabilities when evaluating others (Hofstede, 2011: Torelli et al., 2014: Nanevi et al., 2022)	In individualistic contexts, ability-based trust formation is a prerequisite for intimacy (Hofstede, 2011: Torelli et al., 2014)

Source: Based on Harbour, 2024: Hayashi, 2021: Hofstede, 2011: Luo, 2012: Muniyandi et al., 2024: Nanevi et al., 2022: Torelli et al., 2014: Yan & Takahashi, 2025

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