

The mediating role of perceived quality in the effect of attitude towards social media influencers on consumers' purchasing decisions: The case of Dubai chocolate

Sosyal medya fenomenlerine yönelik tutumun tüketicilerin satın alma kararlarına etkisinde algılanan kalitenin aracılık rolü: Dubai çikolatası örneği

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Abstract

Technological advances have led to an increasing number of business activities being conducted through digital platforms, with marketing, especially digital marketing, heavily relying on social media. Influencer marketing has become a key strategy where social media influencers promote products to their followers. Instagram, one of the most widely used social media platforms, features influencers with large followings and high engagement rates. Recently, Dubai chocolate has gained attention as a product frequently promoted through such channels. This study aims to investigate how consumers' attitudes toward social media influencers affect their purchase intention regarding Dubai chocolate and to examine the mediating role of perceived product quality. Data were collected through an online survey and analysed using correlation analysis in SPSS and structural equation modelling in AMOS. Results show that while the "expertise" dimension of influencer attitude does not affect purchase intention, "reliability" and "attractiveness" do. Moreover, perceived product quality fully mediates the effect of reliability and attractiveness on purchase intention, but not the effect of expertise.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer, Purchase Decision, Dubai Chocolate

Jel Codes: M30, M31, M39

Öz

Teknolojik gelişmeler, iş faaliyetlerinin dijital platformlara taşınmasını hızlandırmış ve pazarlamada sosyal medya gibi dijital araçların merkezi rol oynamasına neden olmuştur. Bu bağlamda, sosyal medya fenomenlerinin ürün ve hizmet tanıtımı yaptığı influencer pazarlama öne çıkmaktadır. Instagram, geniş kullanıcı kitlesi ve yüksek etkileşim oranlarıyla bu stratejinin en çok kullanıldığı platformlardan biridir. Son dönemde Dubai çikolatası, bu kanallar üzerinden sıkça tanıtılan bir ürün olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, tüketicilerin sosyal medya fenomenlerine yönelik tutumlarının Dubai çikolatasına dair satın alma niyetlerini nasıl etkilediği ve algılanan ürün kalitesinin bu ilişkideki aracılık rolü incelenmiştir. Veriler çevrim içi anketle toplanmış, analizler SPSS'te korelasyon ve AMOS'ta yapısal eşitlik modellemesiyle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bulgular, fenomenlere yönelik tutumun "uzmanlık" boyutunun satın alma niyeti üzerinde anlamlı bir etkisi olmadığını, buna karşılık "güvenilirlik" ve "çekicilik" boyutlarının anlamlı etkiler ortaya koyduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca, algılanan ürün kalitesinin, güvenilirlik ve çekiciliğin satın alma niyeti üzerindeki etkisinde tam aracılık rolü üstlendiği; ancak uzmanlık boyutunun etkisinde böyle bir aracılığın bulunmadığı belirlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Medya Fenomeni, Satın Alma Kararı, Dubai Çikolatası

Jel Kodları: M30, M31, M39

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Introduction

With rapid technological advancement, social media influencers have become central to non-traditional marketing strategies. Compared to traditional advertising, influencer marketing offers personalised experiences that are increasingly shaping consumer behaviour (Panwar, Kaur, & Kaur, 2024). Consumers often rely on trusted influencers during pre-purchase research (Göktaş & Eroğlu, 2024), taking their recommendations into account when making decisions. This influence depends not only on the influencer's popularity but also on factors like perceived product quality (Farokhi, Amiri, & Emadi, 2024).

Social media influencers, who operate on platforms that consumers use for reference, can connect brands with consumers by presenting products as attractive and accessible. Through diverse content and personal experiences, influencers enhance the perceived value of products (Darvishi, Mehrani, & Assaria, 2024). Consumers' purchase likelihood, particularly for design and luxury products, depends on their perceived quality. For example, Dubai Chocolate, a popular brand frequently featured on social media, serves as a suitable case study for examining the impact of influencer marketing on consumer perceptions and behaviours.

Perceived quality refers to consumers' subjective evaluations of a product, influenced by their expectations, brand reputation, and recommendations from social media influencers (Jamil, Ahsan, & Rais, 2024). For premium products like Dubai Chocolate, consumers consider not only the product's physical attributes but also its digital representation as a symbol of prestige and exclusivity. Influencers' content and posts can serve as indirect quality indicators, positively or negatively shaping consumers' perceptions (Hsu & Hung, 2024).

While studies have examined the mediating role of perceived quality in influencer marketing's impact on purchase decisions, no research has addressed this in the context of premium products, such as Dubai Chocolate. Farokhi et al. (2024) found that influencer recommendations have a positive influence on purchase intentions, but this effect is more substantial when the perceived quality is high. Thus, consumers' perceptions of product quality can be as influential as their trust in influencers; if quality is perceived as low, purchase intentions may decline, even with influencer recommendations.

This study aims to investigate how consumer attitudes toward social media influencers affect purchasing behaviour, focusing on the mediating role of perceived product quality. Specifically, it explores whether perceived quality mediates the relationship between influencer impact and the purchase of Dubai Chocolate. The case offers insights into how influencer marketing shapes consumer decisions in the premium food sector. The findings are expected to inform more effective digital marketing strategies by highlighting key factors for successful influencer collaborations.

Literature review & conceptual framework

Attitude towards social media influencers

The rise of social media, driven by technological advances and better internet access, has made influencers key figures in digital marketing (Göktaş, 2024). Influencers shape consumer attitudes through perceived product quality, credibility, and advertising perception. Brands collaborate with influencers not only for promotion but also to build communities and foster loyalty, influencing consumer attitudes toward the brand based on their perceptions of the influencer and content.

Recent studies highlight that social media influencers enhance brand visibility and awareness (Mazıcı & Toprak, 2020). However, despite drawing attention, consumers remain hesitant to purchase via digital platforms. Similarly, Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2020) found that influencer credibility outweighs attractiveness in shaping consumer attitudes, while expertise has a minimal impact on purchasing decisions.

Aydın (2021) found that trust in social media influencers has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intentions when it is used strategically. Similarly, Saima & Hhan (2021) showed that influencers' knowledgeability and entertaining qualities enhance perceived trustworthiness, indirectly boosting purchase intentions.

A study by Özkan & Yerezhap (2023) found that expertise and attractiveness, which are sub-dimensions of attitudes toward social media influencers, have no significant effect on consumers' purchase intention. However, the reliability sub-dimension was found to have a positive influence on purchase intention. Similarly, a study conducted by Elhajjar & Itani (2025) revealed that followers' trust in social media influencers directly affects the success of their content and promotional activities. The findings

indicated that when social media influencers are perceived as trustworthy by consumers, their purchase intentions are positively influenced as a result.

As research on consumer attitudes toward social media influencers progresses, the ethical responsibilities of these influencers have become an increasingly discussed topic. In particular, the absence of clear disclosures regarding digitally sponsored promotions and the content produced, along with the spread of deceptive advertising practices, can negatively impact consumers' trust in social media influencers.

Consumers' attitudes toward social media influencers are influenced by factors such as trustworthiness, ethics, and the sincerity of their content. Research globally and in Türkiye shows that transparency, reliability, and sincerity are key for influencers to foster positive consumer perceptions (Saima & Hhan, 2021).

Perceived quality

Perceived quality refers to consumers' subjective evaluation of a product's quality, which is shaped not only by its technical features but also by personal experiences and individual interpretations of those features. In strategic marketing, this concept offers valuable insights and a competitive advantage.

Consumers assess both objective attributes and emotional responses when forming purchase intentions, which, in turn, affect their brand loyalty. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1985) found that perceived quality strongly correlates with consumers' experiential impressions, enhancing loyalty when the perception is positive.

Perceived quality is an essential concept in strategic marketing studies. Brands and marketers often expect products with high perceived quality to be positioned at a premium price point. Therefore, it can be assumed that perceived quality plays a significant role in shaping the pricing strategies and processes of a product.

Global studies indicate that perceived quality has a positive influence on brand equity. Aaker (1991) emphasised its role in fostering long-term customer loyalty. Particularly in the luxury sector, high perceived quality can create a prestige effect, reducing price sensitivity. Kotler & Keller (2016) exemplify this with Apple, whose high-priced products are associated with superior functionality, aesthetics, and user experience, ultimately enhancing customer loyalty.

Considering this information, it can be stated that perceived quality is a crucial factor for brands to achieve success and remain competitive in the market. Brands invest considerable effort to ensure that their products are perceived as high quality by consumers.

Purchase intention

Purchase intention refers to consumers' behavioural tendencies to purchase a product. When reviewing the marketing literature, studies on how purchase intention influences consumers' decision-making processes are frequently found. Purchase intention can vary not only based on consumers' characteristics but also due to external environmental factors.

Spears & Singh (2004) define purchase intention as the conscious effort consumers make to buy a product, reflecting their attitude toward it. In the digital age, well-informed and adaptive consumers make it more challenging for brands to influence perceptions and attitudes. Key factors influencing purchase intention include individual differences, product characteristics, price, and the impact of advertising.

To achieve marketing objectives, firms must accurately understand consumers' purchase intentions, often requiring comprehensive research. In the digital age, practical data analysis and targeted messaging – primarily through social media influencers – are crucial (Smith & Chaffey, 2017). Brands that communicate appropriately can strengthen customer loyalty.

In addition to these factors, it can be argued that consumers may be influenced by the content and campaigns produced by social media influencers on social media platforms, which can positively impact the purchase intentions of potential customers. Supporting this view, a study conducted by Erdoğan & Özcan (2020) found that the credibility of social media influencers significantly affects consumers' purchase intentions.

A study conducted by Li and Peng (2021) revealed that the personal characteristics of social media influencers positively influence the perceptions and attitudes of their followers, thereby increasing their willingness to make a purchase.

Considering this information, it can be concluded that purchase intention is a critical concept for measuring the effectiveness of strategic marketing efforts. Purchase intention, which can be influenced by both individual consumer characteristics and environmental factors, is a concept that marketers and brands must invest considerable effort to understand.

Dubai chocolate

The widely popular "Dubai Chocolate" originated from the Fix Dessert Chocolatier store in the UAE, where it is sold daily in limited quantities (Hui, 2024). British entrepreneur Sarah Hamouda, who moved to Dubai in 2015, began making chocolates during her pregnancy, initially under the brand "Can't Get Knafteh of It." In 2021, she rebranded as "Fix Dessert Chocolatier" to broaden her offerings (Caims, 2024). The brand gained global recognition after influencer Maria Vehera's TikTok video went viral, garnering over 600 million views (Hui, 2024). In fact, in September and October 2024, nine out of every ten posts about chocolate on social media platforms were about Dubai chocolate. Exactly 578,300 of the 640,700 chocolate posts on the digital media platform MMA (Media Monitoring & Analysis), which covers 187 languages and 196 countries between September 16 and October 16, 2024, were about Dubai chocolate alone. It was determined that the most searched topic was "homemade Dubai chocolate recipe" (MMA, 2024). This data shows why Dubai chocolate is so popular in Türkiye, just as it is worldwide.

The virality of a product in the gastronomy sector refers to its rapid and widespread popularisation. This viral phenomenon is often triggered by social media platforms, which serve as digital marketing tools, and the influencers who create content on these platforms (Song, Yu, Jose, Zhuang, & Geng, 2021). The use of diverse flavours, visual marketing strategies, intensive promotional efforts by social media influencers, and the inclusive nature of social media are key factors that have contributed to the global virality of this product (Tarakçı & Baş, 2019). Dubai Chocolate, an innovative product, has successfully appealed to diverse audiences worldwide, fostering a sense of community and unity among chocolate enthusiasts. Through this approach, Dubai Chocolate has successfully established a global presence in the premium and gourmet chocolate market, continually innovating to sustain its competitive edge (Ateş & Sunar, 2024).

Methodology

Purpose and importance of the research

As digital transformation accelerates, brands are increasingly turning to social media platforms for efficient and cost-effective messaging. Social media influencers, who view their followers as both consumers and potential customers, often enter sponsorship agreements based on their follower base. This study aims to explore how consumers' attitudes toward influencers impact their purchase decisions, with a focus on whether perceived quality mediates this effect, specifically in the context of Dubai Chocolate.

A review of the literature reveals various studies from both Türkiye and around the world on the effect of attitudes towards social media influencers on consumers' purchasing decisions. The topic remains open to further exploration from different perspectives. Upon examining the studies, it was found that most of them are general reviews and do not specifically address a particular product (Özkan & Yerezhep, 2023). Therefore, this study focuses on the consumers of Dubai Chocolate. This product has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly due to the impact of digital marketing activities by social media influencers and phenomena. This inclusion ensures the study's originality. In this regard, it is believed that the research may contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

Method of the research

In this study, which examines the effect of attitudes towards social media influencers on the purchasing decision process of consumers, specifically those purchasing Dubai Chocolate, and investigates whether perceived quality plays a mediating role, data were collected through a survey. Permission for the survey form, which includes four sections, was obtained from the Istanbul Gedik University Ethics Committee with the decision dated 03.02.2025 and numbered E-56365223-050.04-2025.137548.29 (meeting numbered 2025/1). The survey was then distributed to participants via online channels through the Google Forms application. To reach the maximum number of participants, the contact link was shared with participants via email, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, and other similar platforms. Data for the research were collected through an online survey, and the online version of the 'convenience sampling method' was applied (Malhotra, 2010). Given that participants completed the survey from various regions of Türkiye, it can be concluded that the research population consists of consumers who use the Instagram social media platform nationwide. The first part of the survey (9 statements) included questions about the demographic characteristics of the participants, such as

whether they use the Instagram application, whether they are familiar with the concept of social media influencers, how many social media influencers they follow, gender, age range, marital status, income, and education level. One limitation of the research was that participants were required to use Instagram as their primary social media platform. Only participants who confirmed they had used the platform were allowed to proceed with the survey; others were instructed to exit. In the second part of the survey (15 statements), the 'Attitudes Towards Social Media Influencers' scale assessed how participants perceived social media influencers in terms of reliability, attractiveness, and expertise. In the third part of the survey (5 statements), participants were asked to rate the quality of Dubai Chocolate, as recommended by the social media influencer they follow on Instagram, using the perceived quality scale. In the fourth and final part of the survey (3 statements), participants were asked questions using the purchase intention scale to assess their intention to purchase Dubai Chocolate, as promoted by the social media influencers they follow. For each statement in the 'Attitude Towards Social Media Influencers,' 'Perceived Quality,' and 'Purchase Intention' scales, a five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' A total of 419 valid survey responses were collected for the study, and the data were analysed using SPSS 20.0 and AMOS 16.0 statistical software. According to statistical principles, when the population (N) exceeds 1.000.000, a sample size (n) greater than 383 is required. Therefore, the 419 responses collected ($419 > 383$) meet this requirement (Yazıcıoğlu & Erdoğan, 2004). Thus, the sample of 419 respondents is considered representative of the population.

Scales used in the research

The 'Attitudes Towards Social Media Influencers' scale, consisting of 15 statements divided into three sub-dimensions – reliability (5 statements), attractiveness (5 statements), and expertise (5 statements) – was adapted from Ohanian's 1990 study. To measure perceived quality, the 5-point scale developed by Chen & Chang in 2013 was used. Additionally, the purchase intention scale, developed by Spears & Singh in 2004, was applied to the relevant statements.

Research model and hypotheses

The research model, developed based on the literature review and aligned with the study's objectives, is presented in Figure 1. The hypotheses formulated based on this model are outlined below:

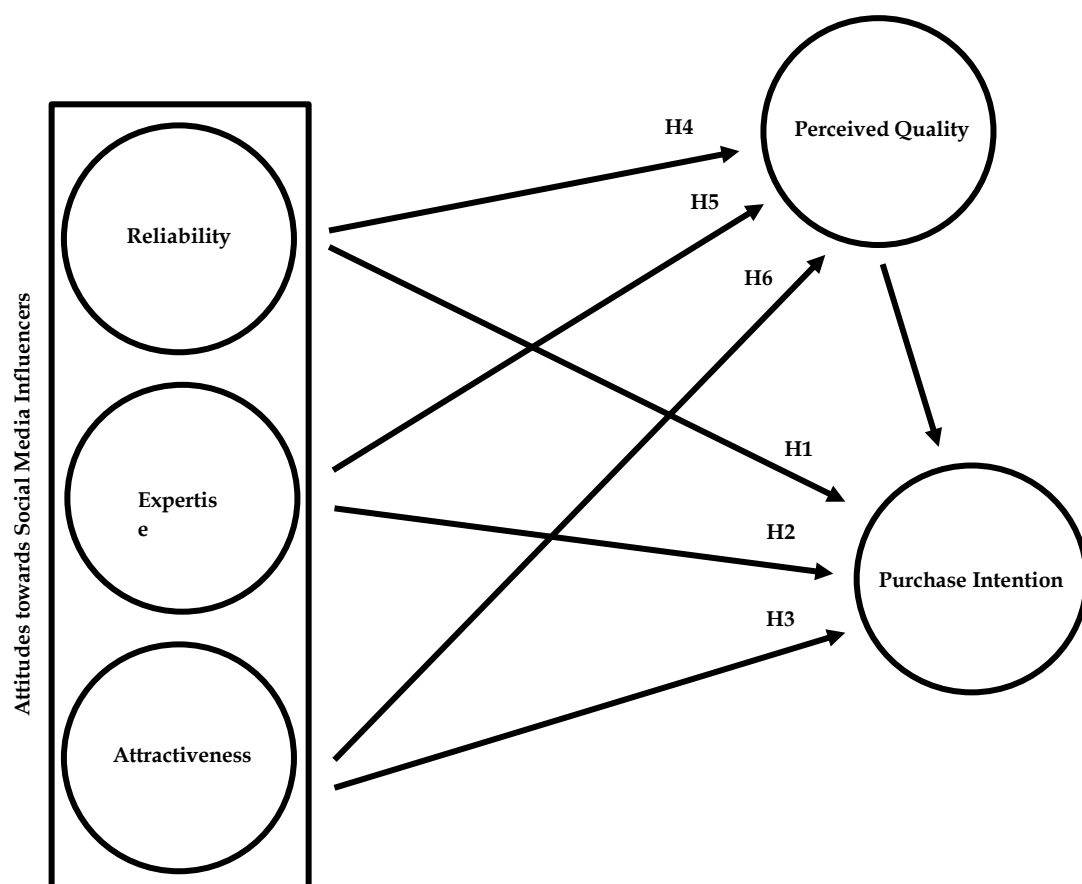


Figure 1: Research Model

H1: Social media influencer's reliability has an impact on the intention to purchase Dubai Chocolate.

H2: Social media influencer's expertise has an impact on the intention to purchase Dubai Chocolate.

H3: Social media influencer's attractiveness has an impact on the intention to purchase Dubai Chocolate.

H4: Perceived quality mediates the effect of a social media influencer's reliability on the purchase intention of Dubai Chocolate.

H5: Perceived quality mediates the effect of a social media influencer's expertise on the purchase intention of Dubai Chocolate.

H6: Perceived quality mediates the effect of a social media influencer's attractiveness on the purchase intention of Dubai Chocolate.

Findings

Demographic characteristics of participants

The distribution of demographic information of the participants was analysed by frequency analysis. Table 1 provides information on the participants' gender, age range, marital status, income, educational status, and the number of influencers they follow. As shown in the table, the total number of respondents is 419, with 273 females and 146 males. 35.6% of the participants were aged 18-24, 29.4% were aged 25-34, 18.6% were aged 35-44, and 16.5% were 45 years old or older. While 37% of the survey participants were single, 63% were married. 2.1% of the participants earn a monthly income between 10,001₺ and 20,000₺, 14.6% earn between 20,001₺ and 30,000₺, 22.9% earn between 30,001₺ and 40,000₺, and 60.4% earn 40,001₺ or more. Of the individuals who completed the survey, 2.4% were primary school graduates, 10.7% were high school graduates, 14.1% were associate degree graduates, 53.2% were bachelor's degree graduates, and 19.6% were master's and doctorate graduates.

When the number of social media influencers followed on the Instagram platform by the participants whose demographic characteristics are presented, the distribution is as follows: 136 participants follow between 1 and 2 influencers, 105 follow between 3 and 4 influencers, 89 follow between 5 and 6 influencers, 27 follow between 7 and 8 influencers, and 62 follow nine or more influencers.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Variable	Groups	n	%	Variable	Groups	n	%
Gender	Female	273	65.2	Income Status	10.000₺ and below	-	-
	Male	146	34.8		10.001₺ – 20.000₺	9	2.1
Age Range	18-24	149	35.6		20.001₺ – 30.000₺	61	14.6
	25-34	123	29.4		30.001₺ – 40.000₺	96	22.9
	35-44	78	18.6		40.001₺ and above	253	60.4
	45 and older	69	16.5	Education Level	Primary school	10	2.4
Marital Status	Single	155	37.0		High school	45	10.7
	Married	264	63.0		Associate degree	59	14.1
Number of Followed Influencers	1-2	136	32.5		Bachelor's degree	223	53.2
	3-4	105	25.1		Master's and doctorate	82	19.6
	5-6	89	21.2				
	7-8	27	6.4				
	9 and above	62	14.8				

Following the demographic information of the participants, the descriptive statistics for the scales used in the study are presented in Table 2.

When examining Table 2, the statement with the highest mean is reliability5, while the statement with the lowest mean is reliability3. Among the statements regarding the expertise of social media influencers, the statement with the highest mean is expertise5, while the one with the lowest mean is expertise1. Similarly, among the statements about the attractiveness of influencers, the statement with the highest mean is attractiveness4, while the statement with the lowest mean is attractiveness1. Concerning the quality of the product promoted or recommended by social media influencers, the statement with the highest mean is quality4, while the statements with the lowest mean are quality1 and quality3. Finally, regarding purchase intention, intention 3 has the highest mean, while intention 1 has the lowest mean.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Responses to Survey Questions

	Statements	n	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Reliability1	The social media influencer I follow is reliable.	419	1.00	5.00	3.20	1.08
Reliability2	The social media influencer I follow is a man of his word.	419	1.00	5.00	3.19	1.00
Reliability3	I find the social media influencer I follow honest.	419	1.00	5.00	3.28	1.02
Reliability4	The social media influencer I follow is trustworthy.	419	1.00	5.00	3.25	0.95
Reliability5	I find the social media influencer I follow sincere.	419	1.00	5.00	3.38	1.12
Expertise1	The social media influencer I follow is an expert in his field.	419	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.05
Expertise2	The social media influencer I follow is experienced.	419	1.00	5.00	3.31	1.02
Expertise3	The social media influencers I follow are smart and knowledgeable.	419	1.00	5.00	3.27	1.00
Expertise4	The social media influencers I follow are talented.	419	1.00	5.00	3.44	1.10
Expertise5	The social media influencer I follow does his job well.	419	1.00	5.00	3.54	1.07
Attractiveness1	I find the social media influencer I follow attractive.	419	1.00	5.00	2.72	1.13
Attractiveness2	I find the social media influencer I follow beautiful/handsome.	419	1.00	5.00	2.81	1.18
Attractiveness3	I find the social media influencer I follow charismatic.	419	1.00	5.00	2.74	1.16
Attractiveness4	I find the social media influencer I follow kind and elegant.	419	1.00	5.00	3.18	1.16
Attractiveness5	I find the social media influencer I follow chic and stylish.	419	1.00	5.00	3.17	1.12
Quality1	The quality of Dubai chocolate promoted/recommended by the social media influencer I follow is considered the best reference.	419	1.00	5.00	2.43	1.04
Quality2	The quality of Dubai chocolate promoted/recommended by the social media influencer I follow is reliable.	419	1.00	5.00	2.57	1.08
Quality3	The Dubai chocolate promoted/recommended by the social media influencer I follow is long-lasting.	419	1.00	5.00	2.43	0.94
Quality4	The quality of Dubai chocolate promoted/recommended by the social media influencer I follow is excellent in terms of image.	419	1.00	5.00	2.65	1.12
Quality5	The quality of Dubai chocolate promoted/recommended by the social media influencer I follow is the best in terms of reputation.	416	1.00	5.00	2.53	1.08
Intention1	I'm going to buy Dubai chocolate promoted/recommended by a social media influencer I follow.	419	1.00	5.00	2.18	1.09
Intention2	I intend to buy a Dubai chocolate bar promoted/recommended by a social media influencer I follow.	419	1.00	5.00	2.19	1.08
Intention3	I am likely to buy Dubai chocolate in the future if it is promoted/recommended by a social media influencer I follow.	419	1.00	5.00	2.35	1.16

Table 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

	Intention	Quality	Expertise	Attractiveness	Reliability	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Intention1	0.934					12.557	54.598	0.964
Intention2	0.908							
Intention3	0.869							
Quality5		0.785				2.924	16.715	0.938
Quality1		0.750						
Quality2		0.731						
Quality3		0.696						
Quality4		0.662						
Expertise4			0.879			1.931	9.394	0.956
Expertise5			0.879					
Expertise2			0.846					
Expertise3			0.813					
Expertise1			0.812					
Attractiveness3				0.868		1.405	4.368	0.902
Attractiveness1				0.834				
Attractiveness2				0.792				
Attractiveness5				0.760				
Attractiveness4				0.566				
Reliability2					0.776	1.125	2.125	0.921
Reliability1					0.703			
Reliability5					0.741			
Reliability3					0.560			
Reliability4					0.690			

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to assess the validity of the 23 scale items used in the study. To determine the suitability of the dataset for exploratory factor analysis, the KMO

coefficient and Bartlett's test of sphericity significance level was examined. Since the KMO coefficient was close to 1 (0.887) and the significance level of Bartlett's test of sphericity was less than 0.05, it can be concluded that the data were suitable for factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 3.

Since the number of eigenvalues greater than 1 is 5, it can be said that the items are weighted under five factors. When the explained variance ratios are examined, the first factor alone accounts for 54.6% of the total variance, the second factor alone accounts for 16.7% of the total variance, the third factor alone accounts for 9.4% of the total variance, and the fourth factor alone accounts for 4.4% of the total variance. The fifth factor alone explains 1.13% of the total variance.

A reliability analysis was conducted to determine the reliability levels, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated. According to the coefficients, the scale sub-dimensions were found to be highly reliable.

The model fit indices of the scale whose factor structure was determined were examined by confirmatory factor analysis, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

			Factor Loads	Model Fit Indices
Reliability1	<---	Reliability	0.856	CMIN/DF= 2.417 RMR= 0.034 NFI= 0.907 TLI= 0.913 CFI= 0.929 RMSEA= 0.069
Reliability2	<---	Reliability	0.94	
Reliability3	<---	Reliability	0.899	
Reliability4	<---	Reliability	0.836	
Reliability5	<---	Reliability	0.716	
Expertise1	<---	Expertise	0.918	
Expertise2	<---	Expertise	0.955	
Expertise3	<---	Expertise	0.895	
Expertise4	<---	Expertise	0.847	
Expertise5	<---	Expertise	0.898	
Attractiveness1	<---	Attractiveness	0.898	
Attractiveness2	<---	Attractiveness	0.817	
Attractiveness3	<---	Attractiveness	0.885	
Attractiveness4	<---	Attractiveness	0.624	
Attractiveness5	<---	Attractiveness	0.812	
Quality1	<---	Quality	0.907	
Quality2	<---	Quality	0.895	
Quality3	<---	Quality	0.833	
Quality4	<---	Quality	0.834	
Quality5	<---	Quality	0.879	
Intention1	<---	Intention	0.989	
Intention2	<---	Intention	0.951	
Intention3	<---	Intention	0.909	

When the model fit indices were examined, it was seen that all of the factor loadings obtained by confirmatory factor analysis were significant ($p < 0.05$).

Testing hypotheses

After conducting confirmatory factor analysis, correlations were examined using the SPSS program, and structural equation modelling was performed with the AMOS program to test the hypotheses formulated within the scope of the research. The results obtained are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the scale and its sub-dimensions, and the results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Results of Correlation Analysis

		Reliability	Expertise	Attractiveness	Perceived Quality	Purchase Intension
Reliability	r	1	0.802**	0.559**	0.690**	0.487**
	p		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Expertise	r	0.802**	1	0.582**	0.542**	0.384**
	p	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
Attractiveness	r	0.559**	0.582**	1	0.584**	0.426**
	p	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
Perceived Quality	r	0.690**	0.542**	0.584**	1	0.779**
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
Purchase Intension	r	0.487**	0.384**	0.426**	0.779**	1
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	

Reliability has a significant positive relationship with expertise at a level of 80.2%, attractiveness at a level of 55.9%, perceived quality at a level of 69%, and purchase intention at a level of 48.7%. On the other hand, the expertise dimension has a significant positive relationship with the attractiveness dimension, at levels of 58.2% with perceived quality and 48.7% with purchase intention.

The first assumption of the study that the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable should be significant is analysed through the model given in Figure 2 below.

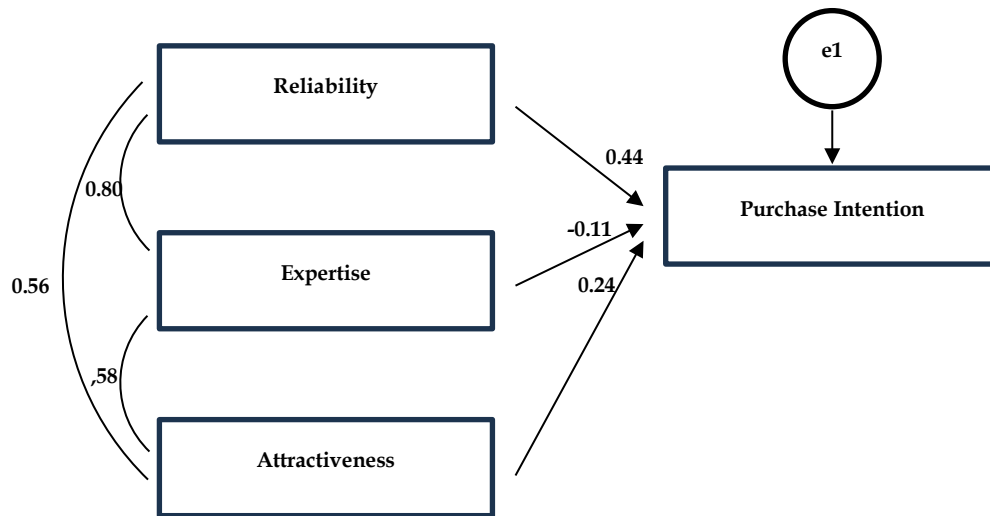


Figure 2: Relationship Model between Independent and Dependent Variables

The model fit values for the established model are CMIN/DF=1.578, RMR=0.061, NFI=0.89, TLI=0.934, CFI=0.926, and RMSEA=0.062. According to the data obtained from the analysis, as shown in Table 6, hypotheses H1 and H3 are accepted, while hypothesis H2 is rejected.

Table 6: Results of Regression Analysis

			Coefficients	Std. Coefficients	Std. Error	P
Purchase Intention	<---	Reliability	0.522	0.439	0.084	<0.001
Purchase Intention	<---	Expertise	-0.122	-0.111	0.08	0.127
Purchase Intention	<---	Attractiveness	0.268	0.245	0.057	<0.001

When the significance levels of the parameters in the model are analysed by regression analysis, it is seen that the reliability and attractiveness sub-dimensions have a significant effect on purchase intention ($p < 0.05$), while the expertise sub-dimension has no significant impact on purchase. Therefore, since the expertise sub-dimension does not affect purchase intention, the assumption is not met, and the mediating effect of perceived quality on the impact of expertise on purchase cannot be mentioned.

In the next step, the effect of the mediating variable on the dependent variable is tested and shown in Figure 3.

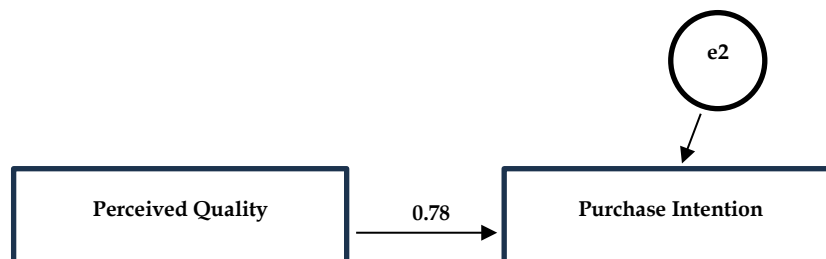


Figure 3: Relationship Model between Mediator Variable and Independent Variable

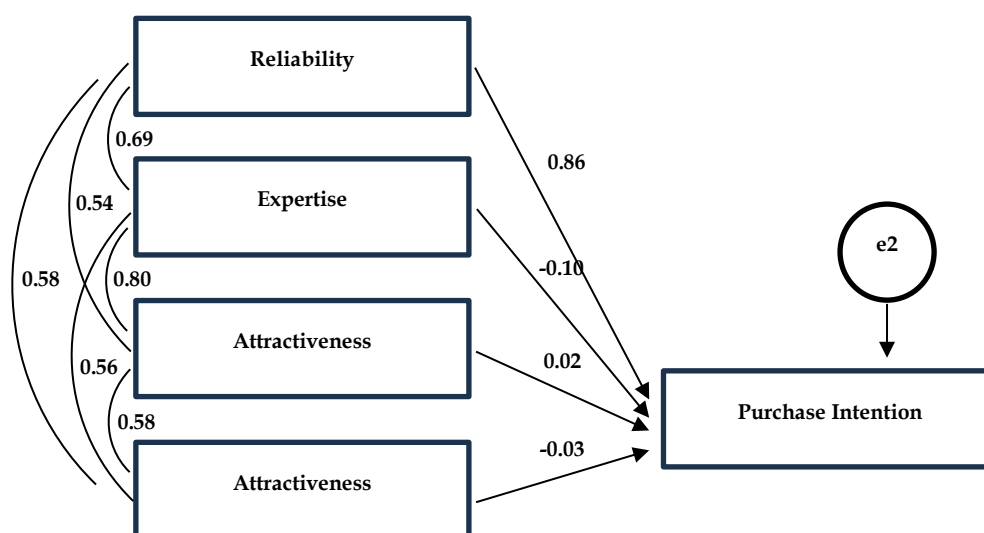
The model fit values for the established model are CMIN/DF=2.436, RMR=0.051, NFI=0.924, TLI=0.939, CFI=0.951, and RMSEA=0.072.

Table 7: Model Analysis Result on the Effect of Perceived Quality on Purchase Intention

			Coefficients	Std. Coefficients	Std. Error	P
Purchase Intention	<---	Perceived Quality	0.884	0.779	0.035	<0.001

Upon examining the significance level of the coefficient in the model, it was found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). According to the data in Table 7, perceived quality affects consumers' purchase intention.

In the next step, independent and mediating variables were included in the model simultaneously, and their effects on purchase intention were analysed and presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Table of Relationship between Independent and Mediating Variables and Dependent Variable

The model fit values for the established model are CMIN/DF=2.041, RMR=0.044, NFI=0.936, TLI=0.961, CFI=0.971, RMSEA=0.048.

Table 8: Model Analysis Results Regarding the Mediating Role of Perceived Quality

			Coefficients	Std. Coefficients	Std. Error	P
Purchase Intention	<---	Expertise	0.019	0.017	0.059	0.747
Purchase Intention	<---	Attractiveness	-0.029	-0.027	0.045	0.512
Purchase Intention	<---	Perceived Quality	0.971	0.856	0.051	<0.001
Purchase Intention	<---	Reliability	-0.122	-0.102	0.07	0.084

When the significance level of the parameters in the model is examined, as shown in Table 8, it is evident that the effect of perceived quality on purchase intention is significant ($p < 0.05$). In contrast, the effects of expertise, attractiveness, and reliability on purchase intention are not significant.

In the last step, since the reliability and attractiveness sub-dimensions, which influenced purchase intention in the first step, become insignificant in the third step, it is said that perceived quality fully mediates the effect of reliability and attractiveness sub-dimensions on purchase intention. According to the data obtained from the analysis, hypotheses H4 and H6 are accepted, and hypothesis H5 is rejected.

Conclusion and discussion

Nowadays, with the widespread use of the internet, it can be said that the potential of digital marketing content produced by social media influencers to influence consumers' purchasing behaviour has increased. The basis of digital sponsorship agreements made by companies and brands with social media influencers is to increase the number of followers and, naturally, sales. This effect can usually be based on trust and can include sub-dimensions such as reliability, expertise, and attractiveness (Özkan & Yerezhep, 2023). When the reasons behind the rapid rise of Dubai chocolate, which has gained

popularity in the global arena, are examined, it can be said that the attitude towards social media influencers plays a role in this situation.

The analysis results show that reliability and attractiveness as characteristics of social media influencers significantly affect consumers' intention to purchase Dubai Chocolate. Considering these results, the H1 and H3 hypotheses of the study were accepted. It can be stated that the results of the hypothesis emphasise the importance of trust and personal attractiveness in shaping consumer behaviour. On the other hand, expertise did not show a significant effect and the H3 hypothesis of the study was rejected. This situation also shows that consumers may not prioritise the product knowledge of social media influencers in their purchasing decisions.

In this study, which examined the mediating role of perceived product quality in the relationship between attitudes toward social media influencers and consumers' purchase intention, it was found that perceived product quality fully mediates the effect of reliability and attractiveness on purchase intention. Given that expertise was found to have no significant impact on purchase intention, no mediating effect can be attributed to this sub-dimension.

A review of the literature highlights several studies on the influence of social media influencers' reliability, expertise, and attractiveness on consumer purchasing decisions (Abzari, Ghassemi, & Vosta, 2014; Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk & Jones, 2020; Wang, Cao, & Park, 2019). Lou and Yuan (2019) found that reliability and attractiveness significantly affect purchase intentions, while Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu (2019) reported greater consumer trust in products endorsed by influencers compared to traditional celebrities. Conversely, Erdoğan and Özcan (2020) found no significant effect of expertise and attractiveness on purchase intention, although reliability played a role. De Veirman, Veroline, & Liselot (2017) showed that trust in influencers' expertise positively influences purchasing decisions. Yıldız (2021) highlighted that the attractiveness and expertise of female influencers, as well as the knowledge and reliability of male influencers, affect purchase intentions through brand love and perceived value. Similarly, Özkan & Yerezhep (2023) found that only reliability significantly impacts purchase intention, aligning with the present study's conclusions. Again, Uzkurt, Sarıtaş, Arıkan, and Sarı (2022) revealed that the reliability of social media influencers, which can also be described as sources, has an impact on consumers' purchase intentions. Brand love plays a mediating role in this effect.

Unlike previous studies, this study examined the mediating role of perceived product quality in the relationship between attitudes toward social media influencers and the intention to purchase. As a result of the analyses, it was determined that perceived product quality played a full mediating role in the effect of reliability and attractiveness on purchase intention. Still, there was no such mediation in the impact of the expertise dimension. Thus, while H3 and H6 of the study hypotheses were accepted, H5 was rejected. Examining the mediating role of perceived quality made this study unique and different from other studies. In addition, focusing on a widely popular product such as Dubai chocolate adds a unique dimension to the study and increases its contribution to the existing literature.

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that social media influencers enhance their expertise to create a more lasting impact on consumers. Producing more understandable and high-quality content for consumers, adopting honest marketing principles, and avoiding deceptive sales policies, as well as working analytically to deliver clear messages can be considered suggestions for developing expertise. In addition, companies marketing Dubai chocolate should prioritise high product quality, as influencer marketing plays an essential role in meeting consumer expectations.

This study has several limitations. First, it only included users of the Instagram platform, excluding users of other social media platforms. Second, the research focused exclusively on Dubai chocolate as the product under investigation. Third, the study was conducted solely within the context of Türkiye. Future research is recommended to broaden the scope by incorporating users from various social media platforms, examining different product categories beyond Dubai chocolate, and conducting studies in diverse cultural and geographical settings outside of Türkiye.

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