

## The Effect of Micro-Influencers on Brand Trust and Buying Decisions, with Brand Preference as a Mediating Variable and Micro-Influencer Brand Selfies as a Moderating Variable, Among SMEs (Food Businesses in Purwokerto)

Meliyana Rizki Prabaningrum\*, Najmudin, Sudarto

Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Indonesia

Email: meliyana.rizki.p@mhs.unsoed.ac.id\*, najmudin@unsoed.ac.id,  
[sudarto1907@unsoed.ac.id](mailto:sudarto1907@unsoed.ac.id)

### Abstract

#### Keywords

Micro-Influencer Brand Trust; Buying Decision; Brand Preference; Micro-Influencer Brand Selfie

In the digital marketing era, micro-influencers have become a powerful force in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the food sector. This research investigates the influence of micro-influencer brand trust on consumers' buying decisions, with brand preference as a mediating variable and micro-influencer brand selfie as a moderating variable, in the context of small and medium food enterprises in Purwokerto. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys to examine relationships among variables and interviews to explore consumers' experiences, perceptions, and motivations. The study is grounded in Social Identity Theory, proposing that consumers form social identities through engagement with local micro-influencers, which strengthens trust in the brand and enhances brand preference. Additionally, personal content such as brand selfies is expected to reinforce the effect of influencer trust on consumer attitudes. The findings indicate that micro-influencer brand trust positively affects brand preference and buying decisions, with brand preference serving as a key psychological mechanism, while brand selfies amplify this influence. The study contributes theoretically by applying Social Identity Theory to local influencer marketing, offering a deeper understanding of consumer–influencer interactions. Practically, it provides insights for SMEs to optimise their marketing strategies through authentic and engaging influencer content that effectively encourages consumer purchases.

### INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital marketing landscape, micro-influencer has emerged as a significant persuasive force, especially for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Micro-influencer, with a smaller but highly engaged follower base, is considered to build trust (Brand Trust) that are more authentic compared to celebrities or Macro-Influencers (Aisy, 2025). For food MSMEs in Purwokerto, a city known for its culinary dynamics, it takes advantage of micro-influencer Local is a vital strategy to penetrate a competitive market.

Trust built by Influencers This is thought to be a key driver in purchasing decisions (Buying decision) consumers (Dempsey, 2023; Pop et al., 2022; Ulfstedt, 2025; Yaramala, 2025). However, the mechanism of how this trust works still needs to be mapped, especially the role of Brand Preference as a psychological pathway and how specific content such as Brand Selfie can strengthen this process. Previous research has shown a positive relationship between trust in Influencers and purchase intent (Wahab, 2025), as well as the importance of visual

authenticity (Zed et al., 2025). However, studies that integrate all three concepts Trust, Preference, and Selfie in the context of local MSMEs are still limited. This study aims to fill this gap by testing the proposed mediation and moderation models. The underlying theory of this research is Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Prof. Dr. H. Muhammad Ramli, 2019), which explains how individuals define themselves through group membership. In this context, the micro-influencer local can form a social identity as part of a community that supports Purwokerto MSMEs (Anisa<sup>1</sup> & Afif, n.d.; Cahyani, 2023).

Trust in influencers and personalized selfie content is hypothesized to reinforce the identity of this group, which in turn increases brand preferences and ultimately purchasing decisions (Crul, 2024; Gupta & Singh, 2025; Jiang et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2023; Lashari, 2025). The novelty of this research is interesting to study, namely: (1) testing brand preference as a key mediation mechanism between micro-influencer brand trust and buying decision in the context of food MSMEs; (2) investigate the unique role of micro-influencer brand selfies as a moderation variable that reinforces relationships in models, an aspect that is still rarely explored; and (3) applies the perspective of Social Identity Theory to explain influencer marketing phenomena at the local level, providing theoretical depth to empirical analysis.

Based on the framework of Social Identity Theory (SIT), micro-influencer local can serve as a member of the reference group (Reference Group) which is influential for his followers. Trust (Brand Trust) formed against Influencers which, reflecting his credibility, honesty, and expertise, is assumed to be the basis for the consumer to adopt attitudes and preferences that are in harmony with his recommendations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Previous empirical research in the context of digital marketing supports the relationship between trust in Influencers with consumer attitudes and buying intentions (Windarsari, 2025).

Based on the research problems and hypotheses formulated, this study aims to analyze the effect of micro-influencer brand trust on brand preference among consumers of food SMEs in Purwokerto, examine the direct effect of micro-influencer brand trust on buying decisions, test the mediating role of brand preference in the relationship between micro-influencer brand trust and buying decisions, and investigate the moderating role of micro-influencer brand selfies in strengthening the effect of micro-influencer brand trust on brand preference. This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical benefits. Theoretically, it contributes to the body of knowledge in digital marketing and consumer behavior by applying Social Identity Theory to explain the psychological mechanisms through which micro-influencers influence consumer attitudes and decisions. The findings enrich the understanding of brand preference as a mediating variable and brand selfies as a moderating variable, which have been rarely explored in the context of local food SMEs. Practically, this research offers valuable insights for small and medium food enterprises in Purwokerto to design more effective influencer marketing strategies by selecting trustworthy micro-influencers and encouraging authentic, personalized content such as brand selfies. For micro-influencers, the results can guide them in building stronger brand trust and engagement with their followers. Additionally, for future researchers, this study serves as a reference for further exploration of influencer marketing dynamics in different product categories or geographical contexts.

Furthermore, personalized visual content such as Brand Selfie is believed to strengthen self-identification (Self-identification) audience with the Influencers, thus increasing the impact of the message conveyed (Widyaputra, 2025). In the context of food MSMEs in Purwokerto,

the uniqueness of the parasocial relationship with micro-influencer. Local and personal content are suspected to be key mechanisms. Based on these theoretical and empirical descriptions, the hypotheses proposed in this study are:

**H1: Micro-Influencer Brand Trust has a positive effect on Brand Preference.** High trust in micro-influencers will increase consumer liking and interest in the food MSME brands they recommend.

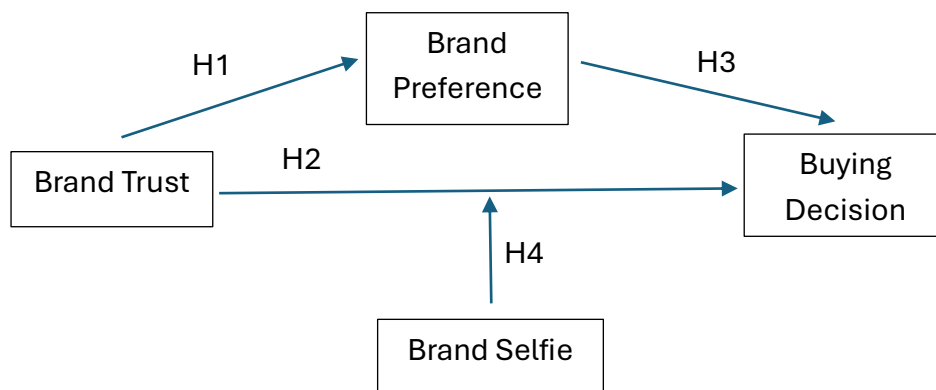
**H2: Micro-Influencer Brand Trust has a positive effect on Buying Decision.** High trust in micro-influencers will directly increase consumer purchasing decisions for promoted food MSME products.

**H3: Brand Preference mediates the influence of Micro-Influencer Brand Trust on Buying Decision.**

The positive influence of Micro-Influencer Brand Trust on Buying Decision occurs through increasing Brand Preference first. In other words, trust in influencers shapes brand preferences, which in turn drives purchasing decisions.

**H4: Micro-Influencer Brand Selfie strengthens (moderates) the influence of Micro-Influencer Brand Trust on Brand Preference.**

The positive influence of Micro-Influencer Brand Trust on Brand Preference will be stronger when the micro-influencer actively uses brand selfies (photos of themselves with products) that look natural and authentic in their promotional content.



## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the mixed methods with quantitative dominance, which aims to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between variables and the reasons behind consumer behavior. This approach combines quantitative surveys to test causal relationships between variables and qualitative interviews to delve deeper into respondents' experiences, perceptions, and motivations (Sugiyono, 2018a).

The quantitative research design used is Cross-sectional, i.e. data collection is done at a specific point in time. The research population is consumers in Purwokerto who have seen content from micro-influencers and purchased food MSME products based on the influencer's recommendations (Sugiyono, 2015).

### Sampling Techniques

Quantitative sampling techniques using Non-probability sampling by the purposive sampling, According to Sugiyono (2018) Namely the selection of respondents based on certain criteria that are relevant to the purpose of the research. Respondents' criteria include:

1. Domiciled in Purwokerto.
2. Participate in at least one local micro-influencer who discusses or recommends food MSME products.
3. I have bought food MSME products after seeing recommendations from micro-influencers.

According to Sugiyono (2018) The number of samples is determined using the Slovin formula to obtain a representative minimum number of the population:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Description:

- N = total population
- e = error rate (error tolerance)

Assuming a population of 10,000 and an error rate of 10% (0.10), the calculation:

$$n = \frac{10.000}{1 + 10.000(0,10)^2} = \frac{10.000}{1 + 100} = \frac{10.000}{101} \approx 100$$

Based on these calculations, this study uses 100 respondents who are considered to be representative of the population.

#### **Data Collection Techniques**

Quantitative data were obtained through a closed-ended questionnaire that was tested for validity and reliability, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Variables measured include:

- a. Micro-Influencer Brand Trust (X1)
- b. Brand Preference (M)
- c. Micro-Influencer Brand Selfie (Mod)
- d. Buying Decision (Y)

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with a selected number of respondents to explore the reasons behind purchasing decisions and perceptions of micro-influencers.

#### **Data Analysis Techniques**

1. Quantitative analysis was carried out using SPSS Version 25. Validity and reliability tests were performed with item-total correction and Cronbach's Alpha. Hypothesis testing was carried out through multiple linear regression, mediation test with PROCESS Macro using bootstrapping, and moderation test through interaction coefficient or PROCESS Macro. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is used to assess the contribution of independent variables to dependent variables.
2. Qualitative analysis is carried out with thematic analysis, identifying patterns, themes, and meanings of interview responses to enrich quantitative results and provide more in-depth interpretation.

With this mixed methods design, the research is expected not only to test the causal relationship between variables statistically, but also to understand the context and consumer experience more deeply.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to analyze the influence of micro-influencer recommendations and selfies on brand trust and brand preference content. Data analysis was carried out using instrument validity and reliability tests, as well as multiple regressions to determine the influence of independent variables simultaneously and partially on dependent variables. The results of the research are presented systematically and linked to theories as well as previous research to provide a comprehensive understanding.

**Table 1. Questionnaire Validity Test Table**

No.	Item Code	r Count (Pearson)	Sig.	r Table	Remarks
1	X1	0,720	0,000	0,197	Valid
2	X2	0,759	0,000	0,197	Valid
3	X3	0,730	0,000	0,197	Valid
4	X4	0,713	0,000	0,197	Valid
5	X5	0,785	0,000	0,197	Valid
6	M1	0,785	0,000	0,197	Valid
7	M2	0,737	0,000	0,197	Valid
8	M3	0,856	0,000	0,197	Valid
9	M4	0,747	0,000	0,197	Valid
10	M5	0,752	0,000	0,197	Valid
11	Mod1	0,829	0,000	0,197	Valid
12	Mod2	0,796	0,000	0,197	Valid
13	Mod3	0,754	0,000	0,197	Valid
14	Mod4	0,698	0,000	0,197	Valid
15	Mod5	0,712	0,000	0,197	Valid
16	Y1	0,712	0,000	0,197	Valid
17	Y2	0,759	0,000	0,197	Valid
18	Y3	0,739	0,000	0,197	Valid
19	Y4	0,759	0,000	0,197	Valid
20	Y5	0,796	0,000	0,197	Valid

Source: SPSS data processing results, 2026

The results of the questionnaire validity test are shown in Table 1. Based on Pearson's analysis, all items of the research instrument had a calculated r-value greater than the r-table (0.197) at a significance level of 0.05, with a sig value. 0.000 for all items. This indicates that all question items X (X1–X5), M (M1–M5), moderation (Mod1–Mod5), and Y (Y1–Y5) are valid. Thus, the instrument used is feasible to measure the variables in this study, namely the influence of micro-influencer selfie recommendations and content on brand trust and brand preference.

**Table 2 Reliable Test Table**

Case Processing Summary			
		N	%
Cases	Valid	100	100.0
	Excludeda	0	.0

Total	100	100.0
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a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.918	4

Source: SPSS data processing results, 2026

Based on the Case Processing Summary, all data used in this study as many as 100 respondents could be analyzed, without any cases being lost or excluded (0.0%). This shows that the research data is complete and ready to be explained further.

The results of the reliability test showed that the research instrument had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.918 for the 4 items tested, which was above the cut-off value of 0.70. This indicates that the instrument is very reliable and consistent in measuring research variables, so that the data obtained can be trusted for further analysis.

**Table 3 Model Summary Table**

Model Summary									
Models	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.783a	.612	.600	3.31775	.612	50.573	3	96	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), M, X, Y

Source: SPSS data processing results, 2026

The results of regression analysis showed that the model used had an R value of 0.783, with R Square = 0.612 and Adjusted R Square = 0.600. This value shows that about 61.2% of the variation of dependent variables (Y) can be explained by independent variables (M, X, and Y), while the remaining 38.8% is influenced by other factors outside the model. The Std. Error of the Estimate of 3.31775 indicates the rate of data spread from the regression line, which is relatively small and indicates that the model has a fairly accurate prediction. The value of F Change = 50.573 with Sig. F Change = 0.000 indicates that the regression model as a whole is significant, so that the independent variables together have a significant effect on the dependent variables.

**Table 4 ANOVA Table**

NEW ERA						
Models		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Residual	1056.714	96	11.007		
	Total	2726.760	99			

a. Dependent Variable: Y

b. Predictors: (Constant), M, Z, X

Source: SPSS data processing results, 2026

The results of the ANOVA test showed that the F value was calculated as 50.573 with a significance of 0.000. This value is smaller than  $\alpha = 0.05$ , so it can be concluded that the regression model is significant overall. This means that the independent variables (M, X, and Y) together have a significant effect on the dependent variables (Y). From the ANOVA table, it can be seen that the sum of regression squares of 1670.046 is greater than the sum of residual squares of 1056.714, which suggests that the model is able to explain most of the variations in dependent data effectively. The total data variation of 2726,760 shows the overall distribution of variation between the parts described and not described by the model.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that all questionnaire items for the variables X, M, Mod, and Y are valid and the instrument is very reliable with an Alpha Cronbach of 0.918. Regression analysis showed that the independent variables (M, X, and Y) significantly affected the dependent variables, explaining 61.2% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.612$ ), and the ANOVA test confirmed that the model was statistically significant ( $F = 50.573$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In practical terms, these findings can guide educators and practitioners in improving strategies or interventions related to the variables being studied, while theoretically, these studies reinforce existing knowledge about the relationships between those variables. However, the study was limited by its sample size and scope, suggesting that subsequent research could expand the sample, include additional variables, or explore different contexts to further validate and expand the findings.

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