



Aston Business School

**MSC MARKETING AND STRATEGY  
BUSINESS PROJECT**

**HOW MICRO-INFLUENCERS HELP NEW BRANDS TO  
CREATE A BRAND PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper will investigate the importance of micro-influencers and how they can help a startup and a small brand to create their brand perspective on social media and they create relationships with the customers. The paper will draw upon the core characteristics of micro-influencers and how impact on Brand engagement, authenticity of the products and shaping the brand perspective among consumers. Drawing from the source credibility model (core characteristics) and literature on brand engagement and product authenticity, a theoretical model is proposed and empirically tested. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire survey was distributed through social media and received 62 responses. The finding shows that the core characteristics of micro-influencers positively the other variables. The results underscore the value of leveraging micro-influencers, especially for new or small brands seeking to foster emotional connections, engagement, and favourable brand perceptions among consumers. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications related to influencer marketing strategies are discussed.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, social media advertising through influencers has grown exponentially, social media influencers or SMI are famous individuals on social media platforms, (e.g., Instagram, YouTube) they have a large number of followers whom these SMI create influence over (Freberg et al. 2011; Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019; Kirwan 2018). These people specialize in creating content to connect with or attract other social media users. For some people, social media is just a tool to communicate with their friends, and they usually block or restrict comments and likes to improve their digital environment, others, notably SMI's believe doing such acts will harm their relationship with their followers and potentially harm their image (Alexander, 2019). Compared to a traditional celebrity like an actor or a sportsperson, SMEs are unique in that they are normal persons, who have created a huge following by 'self-branding' themselves through posting content and engaging with other users (Abidin 2016; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Due to the huge number of followers, brands and people who see these influencers for marketing as well, many brands collaborate with these influencers, to connect with people/customers more directly and create an influence through social media (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

This paper will look into the concept of SMIs, how they create a loyal following, and how brands can use them to for social media marketing from an Indian perspective.

As the significance of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in online consumer engagement grows, emerging academic studies have initiated investigations into various aspects of SMI advertising (for instance, Evans et al. 2017; Kim and Kim 2021; Lou and Yuan 2019; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020; Stubb and Colliander 2019), exploring pertinent issues.

Meanwhile, some studies have contrasted the similarities and distinctions between SMI advertising and traditional celebrity endorsements (Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). It can be said that these studies find social media advertisement, Specifically through SMI's can be highly effective in social media communications and how it affects their relationship with followers. This study will also focus on similarities between SMI's and traditional influencer endorsements, and how consumers perceive them. Moreover, a unique feature of SMIs is that they are not perceived similarly, Campbell and Farrell (2020) have recently constructed a valuable typology delineating five distinct categories of SMIs. By organizing them according to their followers, celebrity and mega-influencers have the highest number of followers (over 1 million), followed by macro-influencers (100k to 1 million), micro-influencers (10k to 100k), and lastly nano influencers (under 10k). How SMIs

can also be classified by the type of activities they do, what they post, what are their niche and more Campbell and Farrell (2020). Apart from celebrity influencers who were famous before social media, in all four categories people used their social media interactions, posts and intimacy with their followers to spread their influence. A company's findings, as reported, indicate that micro-influencers with followers from 1,000 to 99,000 (Gómez, 2019) exhibit the highest levels of interaction and engagement in comparison to mega- and macro-influencers (Nachum, 2019). This heightened engagement stems from their perceived authenticity (Gómez, 2019) and relatability similar to friends or family members, fostering a robust sense of connection between social media micro-influencers and their followers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Jin et al., 2019). It can be said that brands can target micro-influencers to create an authentic, reliable connection with the customers, following previous research this paper will mainly look into the micro-influencers' behavioural impact on their followers, what are the sources of their credibility and how brands (mainly newcomers) can create a communication channel with their customers on social media ( Instagram, Facebook).

On the other hand, we will also look into the brand's perspective, for example how brands choose which influencers have the same niche or target audience, moreover, how brand strategies towards the long-term goal of the brand (better brand image, large target audience).

The brand image of a company stands out as one of its most crucial assets. It not only establishes a competitive advantage but also ensures the company remains in the minds of its customers, fostering customer loyalty towards the company (Deheshti et al., 2016). A positive and widely recognized image represents an invaluable asset for all companies. This image serves as a potent influencer in purchasing decisions, significantly shaping consumers' perceptions of the company and its communication strategies (Grönroos, 2002). This implies that in the modern world, having a good brand image on social media can also have great advantages, as it may lead to better brand awareness, and easier to reach the target audience.

There are many ways on social media to communicate with customers like posting content and direct advertising. However, studies have suggested that influencer endorsements can create a greater impact on the purchase intentions of customers. Henceforth, the concept of influencer marketing pertains to the utilization of selected influencers to construct and/or advocate advertised content to the influencer's followers and the brand's intended audience (Yodel, 2017). Relative to content originating from the brand itself, material generated by an influencer is perceived as possessing greater authenticity and naturalness (Talavera, 2015).

This paper will try to understand different variables that affect the credibility and influence of SMIs. Secondly, it will look into the endorsements done by micro-influencers vs mega-influencers and who have a better impact on the customers. From a brand's point of view, this study will try to see how Micro-influencers can impact their brand image, brand awareness, and brand loyalty. Lastly, it will try to fill the gap in the literature for newborns or small brands that are trying to make a position in the market for themselves.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA MICRO-INFLUENCERS AND CREDIBILITY

In the beginning, this study will focus on the characteristics of micro-influencers and how they create bonds with their audience, following this it will look into the credibility of micro-influencers and the factors that affect the credibility.

The previous chapter told us about who the SMI's and how they use their content to create an influence over a large populace. Similarly, it can be said that micro-influencers create their impact on the audience through authenticity and specific content creation/niche (Casaló, 2018). An increased number of followers adds to the popularity and likeability of that influencer (De Veirman et al., 2017), However with a large number of followers leads to the notion that their product (content) is not specific, and the influencer may have fallen into the category of Macro-influencers which people do not see as opinion leaders (Romero et al., 2010). In other words, it can be said that Micro-influencers have a higher influence over their followers when compared to macro-influencers and people have a higher regard for authenticity and niche over the number of followers.

A study by Pornsrimate and Khamwon (2020), stated 4 core characteristics of micro-influencers that include authenticity, meaning of the influencer, specific content and secret sharing. It can be said that these characteristics are similar to the source credibility model, which states that "the favourable attributes of a communicator affect the recipient's acceptance of the information" (Ohanian, 1990). The source credibility has three main components Trustworthiness, Attractiveness and Expertise (Ohanian, 1990). Subsequently, authenticity can be referred to as trustworthiness which is made up of a person's dependability, reliability and honesty (Rohit Bansal, 2023), and in communication terms, it refers to the endorser/influencers seeming trustworthy when the audience accepts the message they are delivering or believe in them (influencers) (Sallam & Wahid, 2012). Pornsrimate described authenticity as the inner motivation and elemental of their being that they show throw the content on social media (Audrezet et al., 2018; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). It has been demonstrated that this aspect influences the relationship between consumers and brands (Michael, 2019), as well as consumer behavioural intentions, including the intention to recommend, follow advice, and make purchases (Casaló et al., 2018). The aspect of creating bonds with consumers, communicating with brands and taking responsibility for your connections makes authenticity synonymous with trustworthiness.



The next condition is the meaning of the influencer, it can be said that when an influencer can create an intimate relationship with their followers as real friends, by talking to posts, comments or even having small conversations (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). This aspect of core characteristics is similar to the attribute of attractiveness. That suggests in the process of crafting persuasive communication, the subjective quality of attractiveness is considered to play a crucial and influential role. This helps the individual to positively affect the influence they have on their followers, their self-brand attachment and engagement (Zhou & Jia, 2018), love and emotional connection (Pornsrimate & Khamwon, 2020).

It is also believed that Attractiveness, including physical attractiveness and abilities of an individual, comes under the term 'appeal' which refers to the set of positive connections (Erdogan, 1999).

The third measure is the specificity of the content which directs to the person who specialises in posting a specific niche with their content (Gómez, 2019), like an individual posting about the fashion industry or someone posting about the fragrances. Substantial evidence indicates a notable impact of post characteristics on brand engagement (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Hughes et al., 2019; Roederkerk & Pauwels, 2016) and brand trust (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), particularly emphasizing the significance of unique content.

The specificity of the content is similar or comparable to the expertise of an individual. Expertise is defined as the degree to which an endorser is perceived to possess the necessary knowledge, experience, or abilities to endorse a product (Van der Walddt et al., 2009). To evaluate, it can be said that the expertise of an individual makes him more trustworthy and authentic as well.

Finally, secret sharing encompasses the propensity observed among influencers to disclose personal insights aimed at fortifying audience engagement and solidifying their brand (Kim et al., 2013). The augmentation of secret-sharing practices facilitates influencers and companies in eliciting favourable word-of-mouth endorsements (Kim et al., 2013; Sicilia et al., 2016).

The attribute of secret sharing can be linked to both trustworthiness and similarity of an individual, where the study already discussed trustworthiness, now it will look into similarity which refers to the degree of convergence among individuals regarding their opinions, values, or other attributes that can be delineated as similarity when followers contemplate their associations with a particular influencer (Rohit Bansal, 2023).

A study conducted by Kanyawee Pornsrimate (2021), about brand evangelism through micro-influencers found out it positively impacts brand engagement and love, which results

in brand evangelism. Moreover, the indirect effect of micro-influencers also drives evangelism. The study also focuses on the selection process of influencers which is helpful in this research as well, the study tells that you should consider the authenticity, niche, being of the influencer and, secret sharing to get an individual that suits the needs of your brand.

It shows the importance of characteristics required to have a good influence over followers, and it also helps brands to have more interaction on social media. Moreover, it helps this research in finding the impact of selecting the influencer who matches the brand's characteristics.

In the end, the core characteristics come out as similar to the credibility of an influencer, in this case, micro-influencers are perceived as credible individuals who can do effective marketing and communication with the consumers. When it comes to the Indian market there are multiple research that studies micro-influencer and their influence in different sectors. However, this paper finds the gap in research where there are no studies about the impact of micro-influencers and small-scale brands or new brands/startups, as micro-influencers have an authentic personality which can attract new customers and help the brand to create a positive perspective in the minds.

*H1: The core characteristics of micro-influencers positively impact the brand engagement of new brands or startups.*

*H2: The core characteristics of micro-influencers positively affect the brand perspective.*

*H3: Brand engagement has a mediating effect between the core characteristics of micro-influencers and brand perspective.*

## **2.2 MEGA-INFLUENCER VS MICRO-INFLUENCER**

The theoretical framework surrounding the efficacy of different types of social media influencers (SMIs) in advertising effectiveness is intricately linked to the notion of brand authenticity (Beverland, 2006; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Morhart et al., 2015). Brand authenticity, as defined by Morhart et al. (2015), pertains to consumers' perception of a brand's genuineness, originality, and relevance. This construct is multifaceted, deriving from various sources including historical significance, credibility, organizational structures, and the intrinsic qualities of a brand's products (Morhart et al., 2015). This research seeks to shed light on the nuanced impact of authenticity, particularly emphasizing its association with the

level of intimacy demonstrated by endorsers of the brand (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Prior studies have evidenced the direct correlation between perceived brand authenticity and various positive consumer actions and responses such as word-of-mouth, brand affection, and emotional attachment (Ilicic & Webster, 2014, 2016; Napoli et al., 2014). However, there remains a dearth of research specifically investigating brand authenticity in the context of social media curation. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this study posits that when a product receives endorsement from micro-influencers as opposed to mega-influencers, it elicits a heightened perception of authenticity, consequently resulting in more favourable evaluations of the product. Several factors may contribute to the conducive environment for micro-influencers, including credibility, authenticity, and niche relevance, as discussed in the preceding literature. Nevertheless, this study will explore two primary factors contributing to the positive perception of micro-influencers: (1) differences in perceived influencer authenticity, which can influence perceptions of the authenticity of the endorsed products, and (2) the nature of the endorsed product.

Firstly, the perceptions of endorser authenticity can exert a significant influence on the perceived authenticity of the endorsed products, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the "rub-off effect" (McCracken, 1989; Silvera & Austad, 2004; Thwaites et al., 2012). Extensive scholarly literature on the effects of celebrity endorsements suggests that consumers' pre-existing perceptions of endorsers can bias subsequent evaluations of associated objects, such as the endorsed products, as these evaluations become assimilated into consumers' pre-established perceptions of the endorsers (McCracken, 1989; Miller & Allen, 2012; Silvera & Austad, 2004; Thwaites et al., 2012). For instance, research has demonstrated that incorporating celebrities perceived as "stylish" leads consumers to associate the endorsed products with similar qualities of "stylishness" (Silvera & Austad, 2004). Accordingly, when consumers attribute higher levels of authenticity to micro-influencers relative to mega-influencers, it follows that the perceived brand authenticity of products or brands endorsed by these respective influencer types may also be enhanced.

Secondly, about the nature of products, it has been stated by many scholarly sources that there are two types of products endorsed, hedonic and utilitarian where hedonic consumption tends to exhibit a predominantly emotional nature, whereas utilitarian consumption is characterized by a more rational disposition (Klein and Melnyk, 2016; Kronrod and Danziger, 2013; Okada, 2005; Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998). Certain products, like chocolate, are commonly construed as epitomizing hedonic consumption, while others, such as bottled water, are typically associated with utilitarian consumption (Okada, 2005). However, it can also be said that a product's consumption approach can be framed (via advertising), for example, when an advert for sunglasses (hedonic) shows emphasis on

durability (vs luxury), the sunglasses were perceived as more utilitarian (Kwon, Seo, and Ko 2016).

An essential distinction between hedonic and utilitarian consumption lies in their distinct roles in addressing diverse consumption objectives (Chernev, 2004). Hedonic consumption aims to satisfy pleasure-seeking goals, while utilitarian consumption is geared towards fulfilling functionality-related objectives (Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan, 2008).

A study on different SMI types and consumption of products (hedonic and utilitarian) has found some key factors in the endorsements of different products (Jiwoon Park, Ji Min Lee, et al., 2021)

The study surveys over 200 individuals and is surveyed in the United States, and the survey is based on Instagram endorsements by Micro-influencers and mega-influencers. In that study Jiwoon Park (2021) found out that Individuals favour the endorsements of hedonic products by Micro-influencers, but unfavourable for utilitarian consumption. The purchase intention showed a similar result for the hedonic consumption. The survey also showed that higher familiarity with the influencer led to more favourable attitudes and higher purchase intentions. However, there was no significant difference between micro- and mega-influencers' effectiveness for utilitarian products.

In the next part of the same survey, they framed utilitarian consumption products as hedonic consumption. Here, they framed a 'coffee maker' as a "high-end coffee maker" and a normal coffee maker for comparison, which can brew multiple types of coffee including mocha and cappuccino. The result was similar to the above example of framing sunglasses as utilitarian where, the participants reported more favourable to the coffee maker framed as a hedonic consumption product when compared to utilitarian consumption, when they are endorsed by a micro-influencer, and it was similar when it comes to the purchase intention of consumers. However, we found out that familiarity, similarity and authenticity become major reasons for the favour of micro-influencers.

In a similar vein, the Indian market has a thin line in consumption type, where in most cases the utilitarian consuming products are framed as hedonic consumption. For example- a recent advert for a water bottle shown in a stylish vein, with an actress. However, when we look at new brands who are looking to create a favourable perception on social media, there is almost no literature, it research will try to fill the gap of study of smaller or newer brands. This study will posit that micro-influencers can help small-scale brands to make positive perceptions on social media.

*H4: The core characteristics of micro-influencers positively impact the authenticity of the products.*

*H5: Authenticity of the product has a mediating effect between core characteristics of micro-influencers and brand perspective.*

## **2.3 CREATING BRAND PERCEPTION BY MICRO-INFLUENCER ENDORSEMENTS**

In the previous part of the literature review, the research focused on how micro-influencer affects the different attributes brand perspective, here it will discuss how those attributes directly affect the brand perspective. For example, if a micro-influencer endorses a chocolate talking about the quality of the chocolate and it gets a positive response from the consumers, in this part of the literature the study will look into how those positive responses will affect brand perspective.

### ***BRAND ENGAGEMENT***

It is already discussed in the previous part of the literature How Micro-influencers help in creating brand engagement through endorsements, and now it will look into how different aspects of brand engagement help the brand to make a positive perspective.

Hollebeek (2011a, p. 790) delineates customer-brand engagement as "characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions." Additionally, extant literature identifies dimensions such as identity, vigour, civism, or absorption (Patterson et al., 2006; Calder et al., 2013). Expanding on this multifaceted perspective, Vivek et al. (2012) augment the cognitive-emotional-behavioral triad by introducing a social dimension. This fourth dimension of engagement is substantiated by their qualitative empirical investigation involving executives across diverse sectors and is theoretically grounded within the service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

In a way, it can be said that engagement is a multidimensional concept which can include other aspects of the brand, like brand interactions, consumer attachment and emotional engagement. In the first part of the literature, a paper by Pornsrimate (2021), stated how characteristics of micro-influencers help a brand to create a positive engagement with the consumers.

Learning about engagement and seeing the positive effect on consumers, this study posits that brand engagement has a positive impact on brand perspective when it is applied to new

and small brands, the main reasoning behind this hypothesis is a lack of research about how new brands create their engagement through different channels of communication and the impact we study in Pornsrimate (2021) paper, where in their study they find that brand engagement creates evangelism through multiple dimensions which include interaction, emotional and cognitive engagement.

*H6: Brand engagement has a positive impact on the brand perspective of new brands.*

### *AUTHENTICITY*

The scholarly discourse posits that product offerings can be adjudged authentic when they are crafted through traditional or artisanal methodologies (Beverland, 2005; Boyle, 2003; Groves, 2011; Munoz, Wood, & Solomon, 2006; Peterson, 2005), distinguished by their uniqueness (thus, diverging from "mainstream" products; McLeod, 1999; Munoz et al., 2006), or when they fulfil the claims made by marketers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Illustrating this latter form of authenticity, which Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink (2008) term "pure authenticity,". For instance - a beverage labelled as "fruit juice" ought to be constituted from actual fruit to merit being classified as authentic.

It can be said that the definitions and differences discussed above are used to describe the authenticity of the products and these qualities can be used by micro-influencers to show why the product that they are endorsing is authentic. When it comes to brand authenticity, It can be said to be a give-and-take between brand Image and internal operations, in other words, it's the brand's public and private performance (Holt, 2002). Historically brand image is considered at the forefront, considering factors such as alignment with consumer needs, adaptation to macroenvironmental trends, and relevance to stakeholders (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986: p. 136). However, with the evolving perception of brands as entities possessing distinct personalities (Aaker, 1997) and engaging in relational dynamics (Fournier, 1998), the marketing discourse has shifted towards conceptualizing brand authenticity as reflecting something beyond mere facade management. This newer perspective defines brand authenticity as a subjective assessment of sincerity (Napoli et al., 2014: p. 1091), gauging whether a brand remains steadfastly true to itself and its customers, thereby fostering consumers' authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015: p. 202; also see Beverland, 2005, 2009; Holt, 2002).

Morhart (2014), explained 4 dimensions to determine the perceived brand authenticity, which include indexical cues (brand scandals, employee behaviour), iconic cues (communication emphasizing roots/virtue), and existential cues (brand anthropomorphism). It also tested the consequences of PBA dimensions on emotional brand attachment and word-of-mouth. Where, Brand integrity suffered adverse effects due to brand scandals, whereas employee conduct consistent with the brand bolstered credibility. Communication strategies emphasizing historical roots contributed to brand continuity, whereas highlighting virtuous qualities enhanced brand integrity. Brand anthropomorphism amplified symbolic representation. Similarly, three dimensions of perceived brand authenticity (credibility, symbolism, integrity) were found to have a positive influence on emotional brand attachment. Specifically, credibility, continuity, and integrity were associated with an increased likelihood of positive word-of-mouth behaviour.

Another study by Fouladi, Ekhlassi, & Sakhdari (2021), found the lack of scholarly sources about the authenticity of the startups or new brands coming to the market. Their study posits that existential cues wield paramount influence over authenticity perceptions within startup contexts. Nonetheless, iconic and indexical cues undergo modulation by traversing a mechanism termed "goal-based assessment and self-authentication filtration."

Specifically, consumers translate iconic and indexical brand cues into corresponding existential impressions predicated upon their objectives (e.g., control, connection, virtue) and their inclination towards self-authentication.

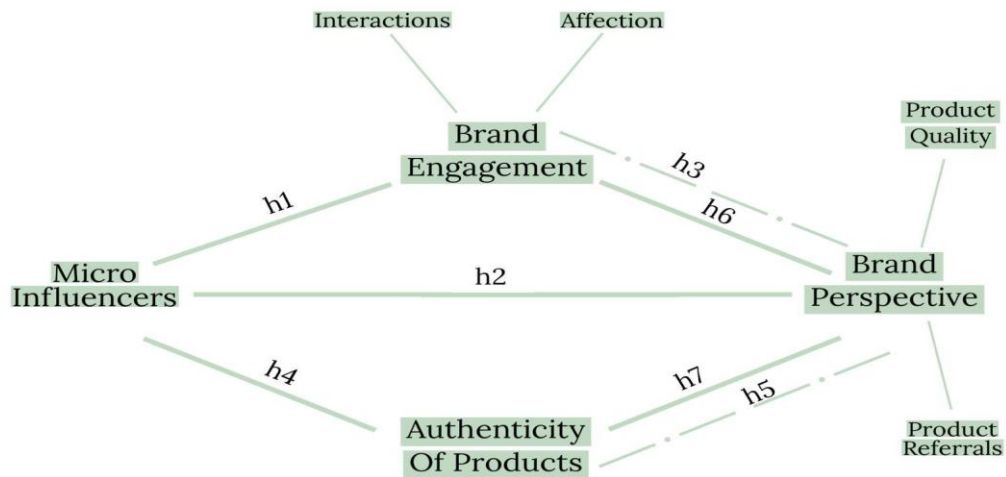
However, this study lacks the attribute of product authenticity that affects brand perception. All the previous studies show how brand authenticity affects product perception.

Based on the discussed research, this research posits that brand perception can be affected by the authenticity of the products, the basic reasoning behind this theory is how any new startup becomes popular because of its products. Especially in India, where people know more about the products, but not necessarily the brand. For example – When you ask someone about a classmate, it produces multiple stationary products, but it became famous because of its notebooks and till now the brand name is synonymous with notebooks.

*H7: Authenticity of products has a positive impact on the brand perspective of new brands.*

## 2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the Hypothesis developed along with the literature review, here is the proposed framework that can be used in finding the results.





### 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the different approaches, strategies, and methodologies utilized in this study to elucidate the research process for readers. It provides insights into the types of data, methods employed, and the quality of studies conducted. Additionally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical and sustainable considerations integrated throughout the Dissertation.

#### 3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Research philosophy pertains to a researcher's foundational standpoint and inherent convictions regarding the advancement of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019, pp. 128–170). These philosophical orientations exert substantial influence throughout the research trajectory, often operating tacitly (Morgan, 1980). These predispositions can impact various dimensions of the study, encompassing the selection of research topics, methodological approaches, data analysis techniques, and the interpretation of findings.

In quantitative-oriented investigations, the positivist research philosophy is frequently adopted owing to its accentuation on objectivity, empirical observation, and the utilization of quantifiable variables to test hypotheses and theories. Positivism prioritizes numerical data and statistical analysis, directing attention toward observable phenomena. It is widely favoured in research endeavours aiming to gather and assess data statistically, with the intent of discerning causal relationships and formulating generalizable conclusions.

This study adopts a positivist approach given its utilization of statistical methods to comprehend the world. However, one drawback of positivism is its potential rigidity, albeit it yields precise and impartial results.

#### 3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research themes encompass startup or small enterprises, micro-influencers, and brand perspectives. Grounded in prior theoretical frameworks and empirical investigations explored in the literature review. This study embraces a post-positivist research philosophy. At its core, it acknowledges the existence of an objective reality concerning the influence of micro-influencer attributes, endorsements, and credibility on brand perceptions. However, it

recognizes the inherent limitations in fully apprehending this reality due to the intricate nature of human perception and social construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Drawing upon prior quantitative investigations (e.g., Pornsrimate & Khamwon, 2020; Park et al., 2021), this study adopts a deductive approach to formulate and empirically examine a series of hypotheses concerning the associations among micro-influencer attributes, endorsements, brand engagement, product/brand authenticity, and brand perceptions. Based on insights from the literature review, the research endeavours to conceptualize and operationalize relevant constructs. Subsequently, it seeks to impartially assess and quantify these constructs through methodologies such as structured surveys and experiments (Creswell, 2014). A methodical approach guides the sampling process, data collection procedures, and subsequent statistical analyses.

The objective is to ascertain causal explanations and generalizable insights regarding the influence of micro-influencers on moulding brand perceptions, particularly concerning nascent or smaller brands within the Indian context. These empirically derived principles have the potential to guide influencer marketing strategies and tactics.

Primarily guided by post-positivist principles of objectivity, the research is driven by a pragmatic aim to generate actionable insights and recommendations applicable to practice within this evolving realm (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

### **3.3 DATA AND SAMPLING**

#### **3.1 Collection of data and sampling**

The primary objective of this study is to explore the interrelationships among micro-influencers, brand engagement, product authenticity, and their collective impact on brand perspective. A web-based questionnaire, comprising scales to measure these constructs, was developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire was structured into three distinct sections: The initial section encompassed a consent form delineating the study's nature and elucidating the voluntary participation rights of the respondents. The subsequent section solicited demographic information from the participants and provided supplementary details regarding micro-influencers and brand endorsements to facilitate comprehension of the survey's rationale. The pivotal component of the questionnaire was the third section, which contained the survey questions themselves. These inquiries were formulated to be comprehensible, employing straightforward language. Each variable was represented by a distinct set of questions. The survey instrument was disseminated via social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp.

Lastly, the survey was sent to the respondents in the middle of March, the survey first told the respondents about micro-influencers and startup brands. In the pretest, the survey told the respondents that micro-influencers are individuals who have 10k to 100k followers, and an example provided by the name of **radiorasp** (43k followers on Instagram) then, respondents were informed about new brands or startup enterprises and the survey takes the example of comicsense which is a clothing brand.

The respondents were told that they had seen a post where Radiorasp was promoting a t-shirt from Comicsense and asked respondents to answer with this scenario in mind, before starting the survey respondents were asked if they agreed to the given condition or not before answering the questions. The survey was closed after getting 62 responses due to time constraints.

### 3.2 Measures

A series of 5-point Likert scale questionnaires was crafted to gauge variables. The attributes of social media micro-influencers were assessed using a seven-item scale previously developed and validated by Pornsrimate and Khamwon (2021). Brand engagement, sourced from existing literature (Dessart et al., 2015), comprised four items assessing cognitive, affective, and interactional aspects of brand engagement. Product authenticity was evaluated using four items adapted and modified from Ohanian (1990). Finally, brand perspective was derived from existing marketing literature (Morhart et al., 2014), encompassing six items assessing product quality, positive brand referrals and optional referrals.

### 3.3 Method of Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the survey/experiment will be analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques will be employed as follows: Frequency distributions and percentages will be calculated for Age, gender and occupation. To test the research hypotheses and examine the relationships between the study variables, One-sample, independent samples and paired samples t-tests will be used to compare mean differences within and between groups where appropriate. the following inferential statistical analyses will be conducted by One-way and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be performed to assess if there are statistically significant differences in the mean values of the dependent variable(s) across different levels or combinations of the independent variables.

Regression Analysis: Linear regression models will be employed to ascertain the predictive capacity of the independent variables (brand engagement, Authenticity of products, core

characteristics) on the dependent variable (Brand perspective) and to quantify the strength of the relationships between them. This analytical approach will facilitate the examination of the extent to which changes in the independent variables are associated with changes in the dependent variable, thereby providing insights into the nature and magnitude of these relationships. Cronbach's alpha values will be calculated to evaluate the internal consistency and reliability of any multi-item measurement scales used.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

The study upheld ethical standards by securing informed consent from participants after furnishing comprehensive details regarding the study's objectives, voluntary nature, and participants' entitlement to withdraw consent. Preservation of confidentiality and anonymity was ensured through the abstention from gathering personally identifiable information and anonymization of participant responses, thus safeguarding their privacy. Participation remained entirely voluntary, permitting individuals to withdraw without repercussions, thereby respecting their autonomy. Survey inquiries were meticulously crafted to be non-intrusive, mitigating potential risks of discomfort or distress. Data collected was securely stored and solely accessible to authorized researchers, thereby ensuring data protection. Prior requisite approvals from pertinent institutional review boards or ethics committees were obtained before study commencement, thereby upholding ethical principles, safeguarding participants' rights and well-being, and upholding the integrity and credibility of the research outcomes.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 4.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

Table no.1 shows that the gender distribution among respondents indicated that 38 individuals (62.3%) identified as male, while 23 individuals (37.7%) identified as female. The age distribution of respondents was diverse. In the 16-19 years category, 9 respondents (15.0%) were represented. Similarly, 8 respondents (13.3%) fell within the 20-23 years age range. The largest proportion of respondents, comprising 18 individuals (30.0%), fell within the 24-27 years category, as well as the 28-31 years category. Additionally, 8 respondents (13.3%) were aged 32 years and above. The occupational backgrounds of respondents varied. Specifically, 2 respondents (3.3%) identified as self-employed, 20 respondents (33.3%) reported being employed, and 8 respondents (13.3%) stated that they were unemployed. Moreover, 20 respondents (33.3%) identified as students, while 11 respondents (18.3%) preferred not to disclose their occupation.

<i>Demographic profile of Respondents</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
<b>Male</b>	62.3%	38
<b>Female</b>	37.7%	23
<i>Age</i>		
<b>16-19</b>	15%	9
<b>20-23</b>	13.3%	8
<b>24-27</b>	30%	18
<b>28-31</b>	30%	18
<b>32+ years</b>	13.3%	8
<i>Occupation</i>		

<b>Self-employed</b>	3.3%	2
<b>Employed</b>	33.3%	20
<b>Unemployed</b>	13.3%	8
<b>Students</b>	33.3%	20
<b>Prefer not to say</b>	18.3%	11

Table no. 1

### Normality

A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to assess the normality of the data across different variables. For the core characteristics of Micro-influencers, the Shapiro-Wilk statistic was found to be .971, indicating that the data were approximately normally distributed. However, for brand engagement, the Shapiro-Wilk statistic was .927, suggesting a departure from normality. Similarly, the data related to the authenticity of products exhibited a Shapiro-Wilk statistic of .928, indicating a non-normal distribution. Lastly, the Shapiro-Wilk statistic for brand perspective was .960, suggesting approximate normality in the data.

### Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Core.characteristics	.103	49	.200 <sup>*</sup>	.971	49	.273
Brand.Perspective	.122	49	.065	.960	49	.097
Brand.Engagement	.173	49	<.001	.927	49	.005
Authenticity.of.products	.196	49	<.001	.928	49	.005

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table no. 2

## 4.2 RELIABILITY

Cronbach's alpha coefficients below 0.60 are deemed undesirable, while values ranging from 0.65 to 0.70 are considered minimally acceptable. Alpha values falling between 0.70 and 0.80 are deemed acceptable, whereas those between 0.80 and 0.90 are regarded as excellent indicators of internal consistency reliability (DeVellis, 1991). The reliability of the four variables was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, resulting in a value of .859. This indicates a high level of internal consistency among the variables. Out of the total 61 cases initially considered, 49 were deemed valid for analysis, while 12 were excluded due to

various reasons, such as missing data or outliers. The high Cronbach's alpha value suggests that the variables are reliable measures for assessing the constructs under investigation.

<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>No. of Variables</b>
.859	4

**Table no. 3**

### **4.3 REGRESSION ANALYSIS**

Here, the research will show the results of hypothesis testing done by using regression analysis, a linear regression analysis is used to test all hypotheses proposed in the literature review.

#### **Hypothesis 1**

The core characteristics of micro-influencers positively impact the brand engagement of new brands or startups. Table no. 5 shows the results revealed a statistically significant relationship between these variables  $R = 0.570$ ,  $R^2 = 0.325$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Specifically, the standardized coefficient (beta) for core characteristics was 0.570, indicating a positive association between the two constructs. The t-value for core characteristics was 4.756, further supporting the significance of this relationship. Additionally, the constant term showed a beta value of 0.583 with a t-value of 0.563, although it was not statistically significant. It shows that the core characteristics positively impact brand engagement, hence hypothesis 1 is accepted.

	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Standardised Coeff. beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Brand Engagement	.325	.570	4.756	<.001
Authenticity Of Products	.194	.440	3.361	.002

**Table no. 5**

## Hypothesis 2

The core characteristics of micro-influencers positively affect the brand perspective. Table no. 6 shows the results indicating a significant relationship between these variables  $R = 0.538$ ,  $R^2 = 0.290$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Specifically, the standardized coefficient (beta) for core characteristics was 0.538, suggesting a positive impact on brand perspective. The t-value for core characteristics was 4.426, indicating the statistical significance of this relationship  $p < 0.001$ . The results prove that the core characteristics have a positive relation with brand perspective, thus proving hypothesis 2.

	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Standardised Coeff. beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Core Characteristics	.290	.583	4.426	<.001

Table no. 6

## Hypothesis 3

The brand engagement has a mediating effect between the core characteristics of micro-influencers and brand perspective. The results revealed a significant relationship between the variables involved  $R = 0.514$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Specifically, core characteristics of micro-influencers demonstrated a significant positive relationship with brand engagement, as evidenced by a standardized coefficient (beta) of 0.514  $p < 0.001$ . This finding highlights the substantial impact of core characteristics on brand engagement. Furthermore, brand engagement exhibited a significant positive relationship with brand perspective, as indicated by a standardized coefficient of 0.730  $p < 0.001$ . The t-values further supported these relationships, with core characteristics having a value of 4.105  $p < 0.001$  and brand engagement and core characteristics together yielding a value of 6.626  $p < 0.001$ . The change in R-square ( $\Delta R^2$ ) was 0.264 for core characteristics and 0.359 for brand engagement, with both changes being statistically significant  $p < 0.001$ . These results suggest that brand engagement serves as a significant mediator between the core characteristics of micro-influencers and the subsequent formation of brand perspective.



	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Change in R Square</b>	<b>Standardised Coeff. beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Brand Engagement	.514	.264	.730	6.626	<.001
Authenticity Of Products	.615	.351	.660	6.482	<.001

**Table no. 7**

#### **Hypothesis 4**

The core characteristics of micro-influencers positively impact the authenticity of the products. The results revealed a significant association between these variables  $R = 0.440$ ,  $R^2 = 0.194$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . The standardized coefficient (beta) for core characteristics was 0.440, indicating a positive impact on product authenticity. The t-value for core characteristics was 2.385, demonstrating the statistical significance of this relationship  $p = 0.002$ . Moreover, the constant term exhibited a significant t-value of 3.361,  $p = 0.021$ , further supporting the overall model. These findings suggest that the core characteristics of micro-influencers have a discernible influence on enhancing the perceived authenticity of products, underscoring their role in shaping consumer perceptions within the marketplace.

#### **Hypothesis 5**

The authenticity of the product has a mediating effect between the core characteristics of micro-influencers and brand perspective. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between the core characteristics of micro-influencers and brand perspective ( $\beta = 0.615$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This finding indicates that the inherent attributes of micro-influencers contribute to shaping consumers' perceptions of brands. Furthermore, product authenticity emerged as a significant mediator in this relationship, as evidenced by its standardized coefficient ( $\beta = 0.660$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that when micro-influencers demonstrate authenticity in endorsing products, it enhances the positive impact of their core characteristics on the brand perspective. The regression analysis also indicated a significant direct effect of product authenticity on brand perspective ( $\beta = 0.223$ ,  $p < .001$ ), further supporting the mediating role of product authenticity in the relationship between core characteristics of micro-influencers and brand perspective. These findings underscore the

importance of considering product authenticity as a key mechanism through which micro-influencers influence consumers' perceptions of brands. The results provide empirical support for the hypothesized mediation model, highlighting the complex interplay between core characteristics, product authenticity, and brand perspective in the context of micro-influencer endorsements.

### **Hypothesis 6**

The brand engagement has a positive impact on the brand perspective of new brands. Table no. 8 emphasises the impacts of brand engagement and authenticity of products on brand perspective. The findings revealed a strong positive relationship between brand engagement and brand perspective  $\beta = 0.420$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that higher levels of brand engagement correspond to more favourable perceptions of new brands. This suggests that active participation and interaction with the brand contribute positively to consumers' overall perspective of the brand. Additionally, the regression analysis indicated a significant effect of brand engagement on brand perspective, as evidenced by the standardized coefficient  $\beta = 0.420$ ,  $p < .001$ . This underscores the importance of fostering engagement strategies to enhance consumers' perceptions of new brands. While the constant term was not statistically significant  $p = .342$ , the substantial effect size  $R^2 = .702$  indicates that brand engagement accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in brand perspective. Overall, these findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis, emphasizing the critical role of brand engagement in shaping consumers' perceptions of new brands.

	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Standardised Coeff. beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>
Brand Engagement	.702	.420	4.541	<.001
Authenticity Of Products	.702	.514	5.558	<.001

**Table no. 8**

### **Hypothesis 7**

The authenticity of products has a positive impact on the brand perspective of new brands. The results revealed a robust positive relationship between product authenticity and brand perspective  $\beta = 0.514$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that higher levels of authenticity in products correspond to more favourable perceptions of new brands. This suggests that consumers attach importance to the authenticity of products when forming their overall perspective of a brand, viewing authentic products more favourably. Furthermore, the regression analysis demonstrated a significant effect of product authenticity on brand perspective, as evidenced by the standardized coefficient  $\beta = 0.514$ ,  $p < .001$ . While the constant term was not statistically significant  $p = .342$ , the substantial effect size  $R^2 = .702$  indicates that product authenticity accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in brand perspective. These findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis, highlighting the pivotal role of product authenticity in shaping consumers' perceptions of new brands.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate how new or small brands curate their brand perspective by core characteristics of the micro-influencer, brand engagement and authenticity of the products. The positive relationship between core characteristics and brand engagement can be attributed to the authentic and niche-specific content created by micro-influencers. Their ability to establish intimate relationships with followers, akin to real-life friendships (Colliander & Dahmén, 2011), facilitates emotional connections and self-brand attachment (Zhou & Jia, 2018; Pornsrimate & Khamwon, 2020). Consequently, consumers are more likely to engage with brands endorsed by micro-influencers they perceive as credible, attractive, and knowledgeable within their specific domain. The mediating effect of brand engagement on core characteristics and brand perspective shows a positive relation as well, although there are many scholarly sources about these variables there have been only a few research that state about the new and small brands, which opens up the space for future findings and open discussions.

Moreover, the authenticity of the products follows a similar trend, showing a positive relationship with micro-influencers as well as mediating them with the brand perspective. When consumers perceive the products endorsed by these influencers as authentic, crafted through traditional or artisanal methods, and fulfilling marketing claims (Beverland, 2005; Boyle, 2003; Gilmore & Pine, 2007), it positively impacts their overall perceptions of the brand. This aligns with the rub-off effect described in the literature (Silvera & Austad, 2004; Thwaites et al., 2012), where consumers' evaluations of endorsed products become assimilated into their perceptions of the endorsers and, consequently, the brands they represent.

The findings of brand engagement and authenticity of the products directly impact the brand perspective of startup enterprises or small brands among the consumers, in the findings study says after the endorsements by micro-influencers, consumers feel a positive connection with the brand, showing brand love, brand interactions, excitement and the brand referrals. Overall, the impact of micro-influencers on creating a brand perspective for the new brands has a statistical significance, this can be seen by the positive impact of all the hypotheses.

In summary, the results of this study offer tangible evidence backing the proposed connections among the fundamental traits of micro-influencers, brand interaction, product authenticity (genuineness), and brand outlook. These findings underscore the significant impact micro-influencers have on moulding consumer viewpoints, especially beneficial for emerging or lesser-known brands aiming to carve out a robust presence in the market. Through harnessing the genuine and specialized content crafted by micro-influencers, brands can stimulate involvement, improve perceptions of product credibility, and ultimately nurture positive brand perceptions among consumers.

### 5.2 THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research presents significant theoretical advancements by expanding the scope of the source credibility model to encompass the realm of micro-influencers and their influence on

brand-related outcomes. Through empirical investigation, it substantiates the alignment between key characteristics of micro-influencers—such as authenticity, niche-specific content creation, and intimate follower relationships—and the dimensions of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. This alignment serves to catalyse brand engagement and shape brand perceptions.

Moreover, the study explains brand engagement and perceived product authenticity as pivotal mediators through which micro-influencers exert their influence on brand perceptions. From a managerial perspective, these findings underscore the strategic importance of integrating micro-influencers into marketing endeavours, particularly for startups or smaller brands seeking to carve out a competitive edge in the marketplace. By forging partnerships with micro-influencers who excel in crafting authentic and niche-specific content, brands can cultivate profound emotional connections, stimulate active consumer engagement, and cultivate favourable brand sentiments.

Furthermore, the study underscores the positive ramifications of micro-influencers on perceived product authenticity, thereby amplifying brand credibility and differentiation amid heightened market competition. This underscores the potential of micro-influencers to not only bolster brand visibility but also imbue brands with an aura of trustworthiness and distinctiveness, crucial elements in today's crowded consumer landscape.

### **5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.3.1 Limitations**

A few limitations come in the research which include, a small data set as the respondents were under 100 which cannot properly represent the thoughts of the general population of the Indian market, Moreover, the small data set can also cause the bias of individual respondents. The study employed a cross-sectional design, which provides a snapshot of the relationships between variables at a specific point in time, it lacks the accurate collection of data which can be collected over a longer period. Lastly, Using the cultural context is a limitation which can be a hindrance to future research as this study gives the Indian overview of data, which may cause manipulation.

#### **5.3.2 Future Recommendations**

The Qualitative methods for the collection of data can be used to further deepen the understanding of new brands and micro-influencers, where structured interviews with micro-influencers and brand owners can provide helpful insights.

Research with more variables can help researchers with the widening of the concepts and influence the relationships between micro-influencers and brands. For example, factors such as consumer involvement, brand familiarity, or social media platform characteristics could be investigated.

Lastly, expanding the research to macro-influencers can help to study the different potentials of influencers, having more followers also adds to the attributes of the influencers.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study sought to investigate the intricate relationships between the core characteristics of micro-influencers, brand engagement, product authenticity, and brand perspective, with a particular focus on new or small brands within the Indian market. The findings of this research offer valuable insights and empirical evidence that contribute to a deeper understanding of the pivotal role micro-influencers play in shaping consumer perceptions. The study's results underscore the positive impact of micro-influencers core characteristics, such as authenticity, meaning, specific content, and secret sharing, on brand engagement and brand perspective. These characteristics resonate with the source credibility model's components of trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, fostering emotional connections and self-brand attachment among consumers. Consequently, brands endorsed by micro-influencers perceived as credible and knowledgeable within their niche are more likely to cultivate favourable consumer perceptions. Furthermore, the findings highlight the mediating roles of brand engagement and product authenticity in the relationship between micro-influencers core characteristics and brand perspective. Active participation, emotional connections, and brand interactions facilitated by micro-influencers contribute positively to consumers' overall perceptions of the brand. Similarly, when micro-influencers demonstrate authenticity in endorsing products, it enhances the positive impact of their core characteristics on brand perspective, aligning with the rub-off effect described in the literature. The study's results hold significant implications for marketing practitioners, particularly those involved in influencer marketing strategies for new or small brands. By leveraging the authentic and niche-specific content created by micro-influencers, brands can foster engagement, enhance perceptions of product authenticity, and ultimately cultivate favourable brand perspectives among consumers. This is especially relevant in the Indian market, where the line between hedonic and utilitarian consumption is often blurred, with utilitarian products framed as hedonic.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge surrounding influencer marketing and its impact on brand perceptions, particularly in the context of new or small brands. By shedding light on the pivotal roles of micro-influencers, brand engagement, and product authenticity, the findings offer practical implications for brands seeking to leverage the power of influencer endorsements and establish a strong foothold in the marketplace.

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# APPENDIX

## Questionnaire for the survey

**For core characteristics** (Pornsrimate, K. and Khamwon, A. (2021) ‘How to convert millennial consumers to brand evangelists through social media micro-influencers’, *Innovative Marketing*, 17(2), pp. 18–32. doi:10.21511/im.17(2).2021.03.)

1. This micro-influencer has an attractive personality
2. This micro-influencer only endorses the products which match their personality and content
3. Do you feel like you are a part of their page, when you go through their page
4. to what extent do you think the posts of this influencer are unique or have a touch of their own
6. To what extent do you believe that they intimately disclose online who they are, openly and fully
7. Micro-influencers tend to be less broad in the content that they post, meaning when post new content it is similar to the previous one

**For brand engagement** (Dessart, L., Veloutsou, C. and Morgan-Thomas, A. (2015) ‘Consumer engagement in online brand communities: A Social Media Perspective’, *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 24(1), pp. 28–42. doi:10.1108/jpbm-06-2014-0635.)

8. I have grown to like this brand more than the other brands offering the same product/service.
9. I am interested in anything about this brand. It gets me excited when the brands post something on their social media.
10. I enjoy interacting when the brand on social media posts on their page.
11. I say positive things about the brand to other people.

**For product authenticity** (Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39-52.)

12. To what extent do you consider the Micro-influencer's endorsement to be trustworthy and Authentic?

13. How honest do you perceive the micro-influencer endorser to be in their endorsements?

14. How much confidence do you have in the quality of the products endorsed by the micro-influencer

15. How likely are you to recommend the product to others based on its perceived authenticity?

**For brand perspective** (Morhart, F. *et al.* (2014) 'Brand authenticity: An integrative framework and measurement scale', *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(2), pp. 200–218. doi:10.1016/j.jcps.2014.11.006.)

16. How will you rate the overall quality of the products

17. The brand always delivers on the claims that they have for their products

18. You feel like you're personally connected to the brand after trying their products

19. The brand makes you feel like an important and valuable customer

20. you refer the products of the brand to other people who might seek your advice