

Effect of social media fashion influencers' authenticity on brand loyalty:

mediating role of brand trust

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Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of social media influencers (SMI) has grown exponentially (Balaban and Szabolcs, 2022). SMI are popular thanks to the technological progress of social media and the development of interactive marketing, but also as a result of an increasingly suspicious perception of consumers with regard to brand promotion messages on websites and social media (SM) which are considered as intrusive and inauthentic (Lee and Eastin, 2021; Vander Schee et al., 2020). Indeed, consumers, in search of authenticity, turn to other consumers to obtain real information about the brand (de Brito Silva et al., 2022). This did not escape brands that have been able to use influence marketing through partnerships between brands and influencers to mitigate distrust of conventional marketing initiatives (Luoma-Aho et al., 2021, McNutt, 2021). In this sense, influencers use their image and the relationship of trust with their followers that affects the endorsed brand trust (Kim and Kim, 2021). However, it's important for marketers to determine the contribution of the SMI authenticity to brand loyalty and to underline the possible mediating role of brand trust in this link.

Methods

-A quantitative study was performed within a convenience sample of 402 Tunisian Instagram users and followers of Fashion influencers on Instagram via a questionnaire administrated online
-Data analysis was performed via the Partial least squares (PLS) using the software SMART PLS 3.2.

Discussion

First, perceived truthful endorsements are key drivers of brand trust and brand loyalty. As such, followers perceive that the SMI are providing truthful evaluations of the endorsed brands (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020; Chetioui et al., 2020), follow the recommendations of SMI and trust those brands, which in turn enhance brand loyalty.

Second, sincerity boosts brand trust while it did not significantly influence brand loyalty. Followers tend to trust more the followers who are sincere and trust the brands they are endorsing (Kim and Kim, 2021).

Third, SMI perceived expertise significantly influence both brand trust and loyalty. Followers who perceive that the SMI is an expert in the fashion field tend to evaluate positively their recommendations (Kim and Kim, 2021; Lee and Eastin, 2021) and trust the brand they are endorsing and in turn be loyal to them. Fourth, SMI visibility is not significantly linked to both brand trust and loyalty. This result can be explained by the fact that visibility boosts brand awareness but do not necessarily promote brand trust and loyalty. Followers do not necessarily trust followers who are exhibiting their personal information on social media. This result corroborates the findings of Lee and Eastin (2021) who found that visibility does not influence followers' attitudes and purchase intention.

Finally, perceived SMI uniqueness let followers feel that they are distinguished from other influencers, which let them more willing to follow them and to accept their recommendations (Lee and Eastin, 2021), and in turn trust the brands they endorse.

Psychometric properties of constructs

Table 1 shows that the constructs' reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (greater than 0.7) and the convergent validity are assessed (Average Variance Extracted (AVE) above 0.5) (Hair et al., 2020). As Table 2 highlights, all HTMT values are below 0.85 (Hair et al., 2020). The constructs' discriminant validity is assessed.

Table 1 : Reliability and convergent validity of constructs

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance extracted (AVE)	Measures (references)
BT	0.773	0.869	0.688	Lau and Lee (1999)
EXP	0.723	0.841	0.641	
SIN C	0.856	0.899	0.691	Lee and Eastin (2021)
TE	0.847	0.897	0.685	
UNI	0.799	0.877	0.706	
VIS	0.888	0.922	0.748	
BL	0.858	0.914	0.779	Torres et al. (2022)

Table 2 : Discriminant validity of constructs

	Age	BT	Edu	Exp	GD	SINC	TE	UNI	VIS
BT	0.143								
EDU	0.220	0.025							
EXP	0.142	0.601	0.242						
GD	0.474	0.079	0.188	0.102					
SINC	0.234	0.538	0.124	0.630	0.119				
TE	0.053	0.621	0.065	0.608	0.043	0.409			
UNI	0.177	0.652	0.152	0.664	0.061	0.490	0.425		
VIS	0.239	0.714	0.139	0.631	0.255	0.486	0.646	0.512	
BL	0.092	0.753	0.061	0.641	0.049	0.406	0.609	0.430	0.520

Notes : BT: Brand trust, Edu: Education, GD: Gender, SINC: Sincerity, TE: truthful endorsements, UNI: Uniqueness, VIS: Visibility, BL: Brand loyalty

Research contributions

This research contributes to the social influencer marketing literature through highlighting the contributions of sub-dimensions of SMI authenticity to brand trust and brand loyalty that have never been studied. We used a novel scale conceptualizing this variable as integrating five dimensions that presents a underlines what it an authentic SMI in the eyes of consumers (Less and Eastin, 2021). This study underlines that perceived expertise and truthful endorsements are key drivers of brand loyalty and that Perceived SMI expertise, uniqueness, sincerity and truthful endorsements are key antecedents of brand trust. This study can help marketers in defining how followers perceive authentic Fashion influencers on Instagram and how this perception can affect their trust in the brands endorsed by SMI and Brand loyalty. In this vein, it highlights to fashion brands' marketers the components of the SMI perceived authenticity by customers to improve brand trust and loyalty.

Limits and research perspectives

Limits:

- Sample size
- This research focused on Fashion SMI Instagram only.
- Other variables could be integrated to the model.

Research Perspectives

- combine qualitative and quantitative approach and increase the sample size,
- integrate other variables into the research model such as SM WOM and SMI attractiveness and credibility and conduct this study on other SM platforms.

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Research Questions

- Does perceived SMI authenticity influence positively brand loyalty?
- Does brand trust mediate the link between SMI authenticity and brand loyalty?

Literature review

An SMI is defined as an independent third-party endorser who influence the target audience attitudes through SM use (Chetioui et al., 2020). The SMI power of persuasion depends particularly on the perception of their authenticity by the followers (Van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021).

Perceived authenticity is a subjective view about the uniqueness, originality and realness of a person, an object, an organization or a brand (Luoma-Aho et al., 2021). The perception of influencer's authenticity in SM is subjective, personally defined, and socially constructed (Lee and Eastin, 2021). These authors consider SMI perceived authenticity as a multi-dimensional construct integrating sincerity, truthful endorsement, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness.

Sincerity is related to the SMI perceived honesty, warmth and cheerfulness (Lee and Eastin, 2021). Trustful endorsement is evidenced when SMIs engage in authentic behavior when endorsing brands (Torres et al., 2019). Visibility materializes that SMIs are open and transparent, and expose personal aspects of their lives. Expertise is about the SMI capacity to show a specialized genre of expertise in their field which enhances their credibility to act an opinion leaders (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016). Finally, uniqueness refers to the followers' perceptions of the originality and distinctiveness of an SMI compared to other influencers (Balaban and Szabolcs, 2022; Lee and Eastin, 2021).

From a consumer socialization theory perspective, an SMI can be viewed as a computer-mediated socialization agent who uses SM to transmits their attitudes, preferences and behaviors to followers (Nafees et al., 2021). Therefore, followers who perceive the authenticity of the influencer are predisposed to adopt the norms, attitude and ideas conveyed by the SMI and are inclined to behave consistently with the SMI followed by being loyal to the brand endorsed by the SMI. Besides, SMIs have strong influence on consumers' decisions to be loyal to a specific brand. If followers perceive an SMI as authentic, they are likely to trust brand and be loyal to the product endorsed by the influencer (Makgosa and Mohube, 2007).

SMIs who are sincere, unique, expert and provide truthful evaluations of the endorsed brands tend to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the followers as they evaluate favourably their recommendations (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020; Chetioui et al., 2020; Kim and Kim, 2021; Lee and Eastin, 2021). Besides SMI visibility build brand awareness and can affect the followers' attitudes toward them and the brands they endorse (Lee and Eastin, 2021).

The idea outlined in this research is that these sub-dimensions of SMI authenticity can influence positively influencers, and let them trust the endorsed brands and ultimately be loyal to those brands (Ebrahim, 2020).

Research model and hypotheses

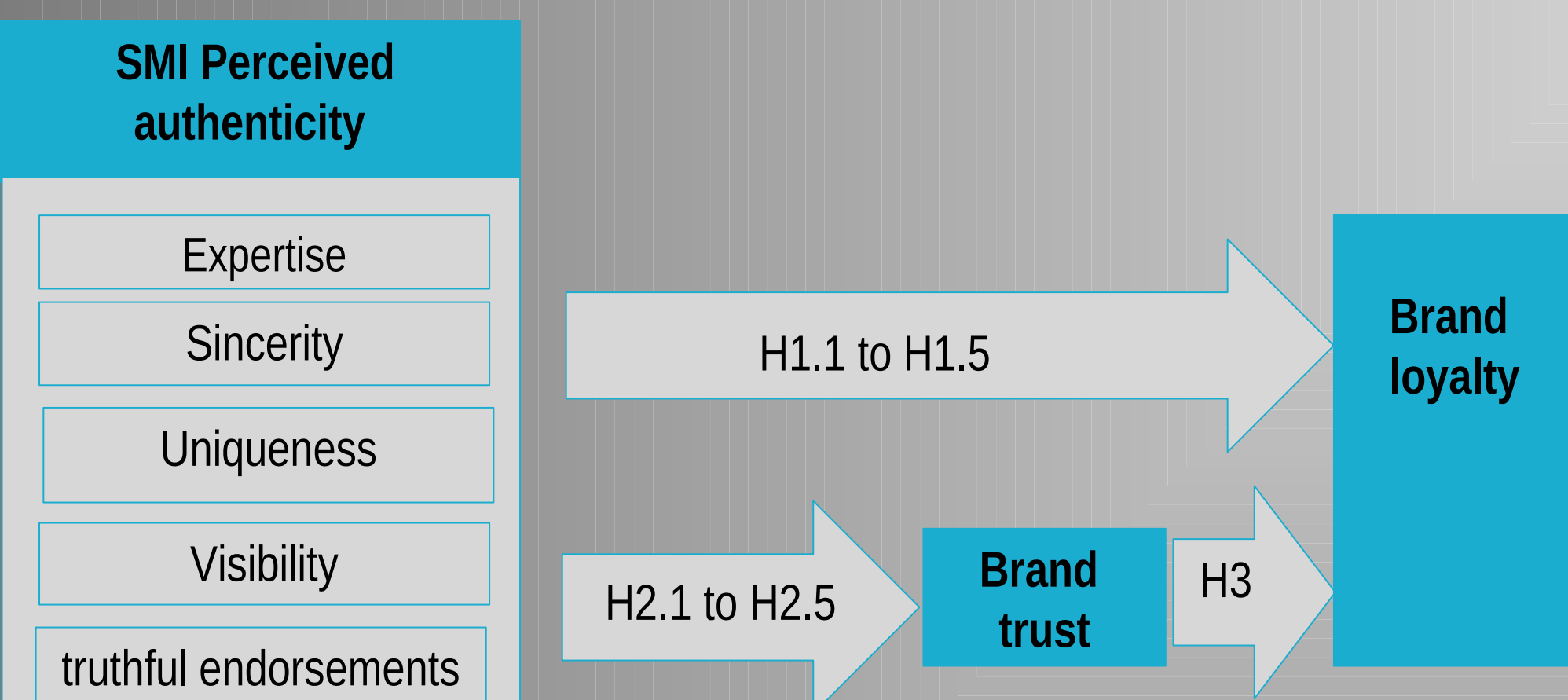


Figure 1: Modèle conceptuel

Hypotheses:

H1.1 to H1.5: Perceived SMI sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise and uniqueness positively influence brand loyalty.

H2.1 to H2.5 : Perceived SMI sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise and uniqueness positively influence brand trust.

H3 : Brand trust positively influences brand loyalty.

H4 : Brand trust mediates the link between Perceived SMI sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise and uniqueness and brand loyalty.

Results

- Perceived SMI expertise and truthful endorsements positively influence brand loyalty, whereas perceived SMI sincerity, uniqueness and sincerity do not influence significantly brand loyalty.

-Brand trust positively influences brand loyalty.

- Perceived SMI expertise, uniqueness, sincerity and truthful endorsements positively influence brand trust, whereas perceived SMI visibility does not influence significantly brand trust.

-Only Brand trust mediates the link between SMI truthful endorsements and brand loyalty (Indirect effect =0.083* and Value added for (VAF) is equal to 30.18%.

Table 3 : Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Independent variable	Dependent variable	β	C.R.	P Values
H1.1	Expertise	Brand loyalty	0.245	2.941	0.003
H1.2	Visibility		0.041	0.703	0.482
H1.3	Uniqueness		-0.039	0.495	0.621
H1.4	Sincerity		-0.004	0.052	0.959
H1.5	truthful endorsements		0.192	2.911	0.004
H3	Brand trust	0.436	5.548	0.000	
Control variables	Age	0.170	2.676	0.008	
	Gender	0.021	0.400	0.689	
	Education	-0.037	0.638	0.524	
H2.1	Expertise	Brand trust	0.132	1.968	0.049
H2.2	Visibility		0.003	0.043	0.966
H2.3	Uniqueness		0.280	5.158	0.000
H2.4	Sincerity		0.299	4.533	0.000
H2.5	truthful endorsements		0.191	2.929	0.004

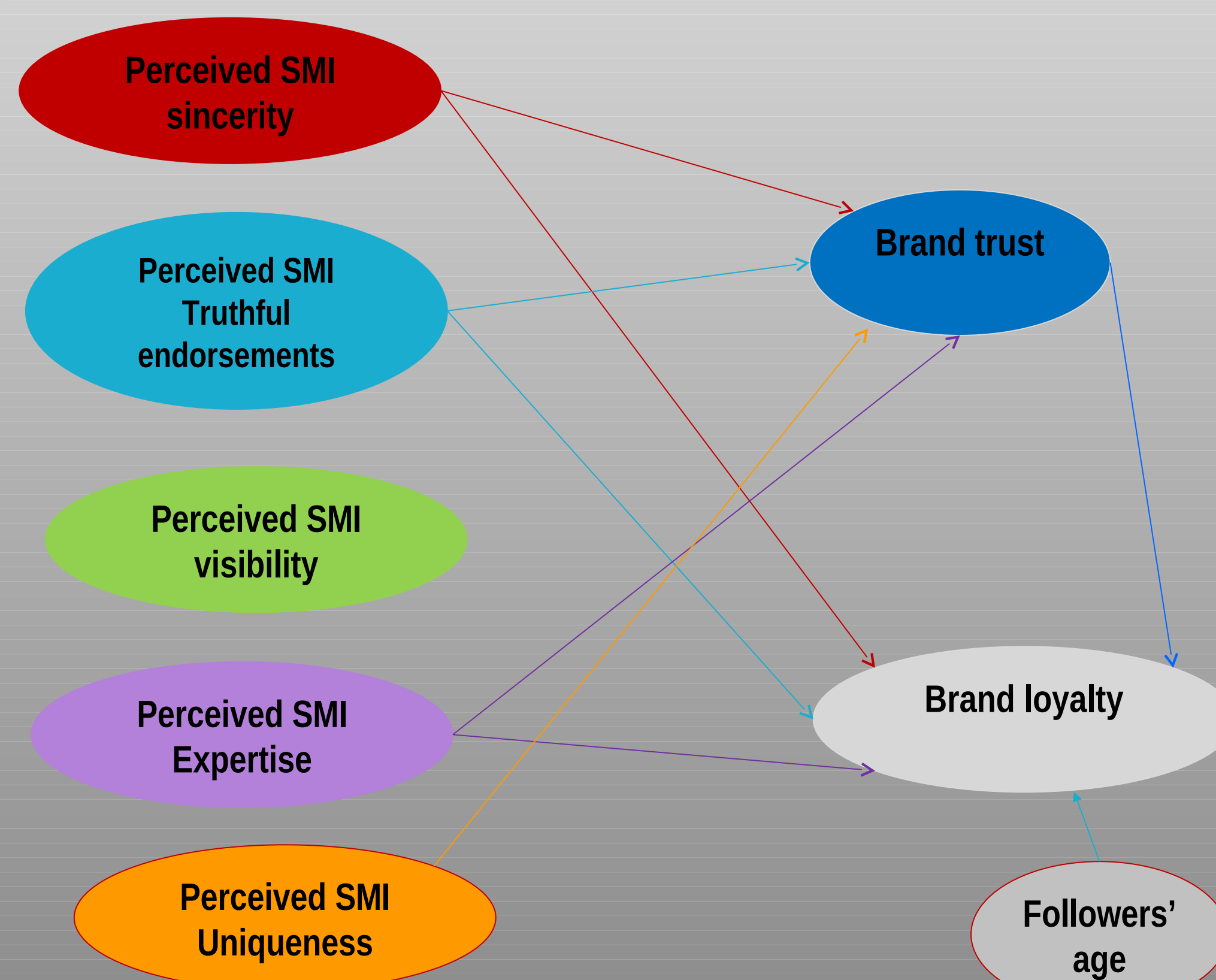


Figure 2: Tested model (Significant results)