

Beauty by Influence: How Micro- and Celebrity Influencers Shape Brand Trust and Purchase Intention for K-Beauty Products in the U.S.

Victoria Lacerda

Fundação Getulio Vargas

Carlos Lourenco

Fundacao Getulio Vargas

Vanessa Santos

Fundação Getulio Vargas

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Abstract:

This study investigates how micro and celebrity influencers shape brand trust and purchase intention for Korean beauty (K-Beauty) products in the U.S. Using a randomized experimental design with 154 participants, the study compares the persuasive effectiveness of micro-influencer, celebrity, and non-influencer content. Results show that micro-influencers significantly outperform celebrities in generating trust and purchase intention. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, findings highlight the role of authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness in cross-cultural marketing. The study offers strategic insights for global beauty brands targeting low-context markets, such as the U.S.

Keywords: Micro-influencers; Brand trust; Cross-cultural marketing

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media

1. Introduction

The international rise of Korean beauty (K-Beauty) has reshaped contemporary consumer markets and introduced new competitive dynamics into the global beauty industry. Once perceived as a niche regional phenomenon, K-Beauty has become a global reference point for skincare innovation, ingredient transparency, and routine-based product use. This expansion stems from the broader cultural diffusion associated with the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which has elevated the visibility of Korean cultural products, including music, cinema, celebrity culture, and fashion, across global markets (MacDonald, 2023). In the United States, these cultural flows are accompanied by a marked increase in the adoption of Korean beauty routines and interest in Korean brands, contributing to the growth of K-Beauty from a specialized category to a mainstream segment.

Against this backdrop, influencer marketing has become one of the most prominent strategies for bridging cultural distance and shaping the adoption of K-Beauty products. Social media has reorganized how consumers evaluate beauty products by elevating influencers, rather than brands, as central figures in the decision-making process (Schouten et al., 2019). Through demonstrations, routine explanations, ingredient analyses, and product comparisons, influencers serve as intermediaries who structure consumers' understanding of products and reduce informational asymmetries. This dynamic is especially important in the beauty category, where product efficacy is subjective, results are individualized, and consumers often cannot test products before purchasing.

Micro-influencers have emerged as particularly influential within the U.S. beauty market. Known for their niche expertise, consistent engagement, and relatable narratives, micro-influencers frequently generate deeper emotional connection and trust than celebrities or macro-level endorsers (Almahdi et al., 2022). Their perceived authenticity and proximity often contribute to a stronger sense of intimacy between influencer and follower, which enhances message credibility and reduces skepticism. In contrast, celebrity endorsements, although dominant in Korean domestic marketing, may not translate effectively to the expectations of U.S. audiences, who tend to prioritize peer-like communication.

This difference is further explained by cross-cultural communication theories. South Korea's high-context communication style and collectivist social structure create marketing environments where authority, prestige, and celebrity visibility play a substantial role in persuasion (Hofstede, 2001). The United States, however, is characterized by low-context communication, direct messaging, individualism, and a preference for authenticity and expertise. These cultural differences may influence how U.S. consumers evaluate foreign

brands and how they respond to endorsements made by celebrities versus micro-influencers.

Yet, despite the rapidly increasing importance of K-Beauty in the U.S. market, there is limited empirical evidence comparing influencer types in this cross-cultural context. Most studies on influencer marketing emphasize general mechanisms of persuasion, engagement, or authenticity but do not isolate the effects of celebrity versus micro-level influence in foreign brand adoption. Similarly, although previous work highlights the importance of Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953) and Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), few studies integrate these frameworks within controlled experimental designs that test causal effects on trust and behavioral intention.

To address this gap, the present study examines how micro-influencer and celebrity influencer endorsements differentially influence brand trust and purchase intention for a K-Beauty brand among U.S. consumers. Using a randomized experimental design, we evaluate whether micro-influencers outperform celebrities in generating trust-based and behavioral outcomes, offering new insights for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand how foreign beauty brands gain traction in Western markets.

2. Literature Review

Social media has reconfigured the mechanisms through which consumers encounter information, evaluate claims, and form attitudes toward beauty products. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer-generated content is structured around personal relevance, experiential narratives, and ongoing communication (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencers often function as content curators who translate complex product features into simplified, relatable explanations, making them powerful sources of persuasion in categories that demand guidance and education.

In beauty markets, consumers frequently rely on demonstrations, user testimonials, and ingredient breakdowns to evaluate the efficacy and safety of products (Yang, 2024). The sensory and experiential nature of skincare, combined with the impossibility of verifying results prior to purchase, makes the category highly susceptible to evaluations mediated by trusted sources. Influencers fill this evaluative gap by offering high-frequency content, personal feedback loops, and perceived competence within specific niches.

Micro-influencers, in particular, benefit from their scale and positioning. Their smaller but more engaged follower bases foster perceptions of accessibility and sincerity, enhancing both trust and identification (Almahdi et al., 2022). They are often perceived as enthusiasts or semi-experts who invest authentic effort into testing and reviewing products. Their expertise tends to be domain-specific, focused on skincare, ingredients, routines, or lifestyle niches,

making their evaluations more diagnostic and reliable from the consumer's perspective.

On the other hand, celebrity influencers have visibility and prestige but may lack the perceived closeness and expertise needed to build trust in skincare. While celebrity endorsements have historically been effective in markets that value authority and aspirational identities, such as South Korea, they may not align with U.S. consumers' communicative preferences. Research in cross-cultural communication underscores that U.S. audiences respond positively to transparency, peer-based recommendations, and explicit informational cues (Hofstede, 2001). In such environments, the persuasive appeal of celebrities may be weakened if audiences perceive endorsements as transactional or disconnected from authentic product experience.

Within this landscape, Source Credibility Theory offers a foundational explanation of how consumers interpret influencer messages. Persuasion is shaped by perceptions of the endorser's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Hovland et al., 1953). Expertise reflects the influencer's knowledge or competence; trustworthiness concerns the perceived honesty or integrity; and attractiveness includes perceived likability or affability. Prior studies suggest that micro-influencers often score high on perceived honesty and expertise, whereas celebrities may be penalized for perceived commercial motives or insufficient product knowledge (Schouten et al., 2019).

Parasocial Interaction Theory further explains why influencers are particularly powerful in shaping consumer attitudes. Parasocial interaction refers to the one-sided emotional bonds audiences form with media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In social media environments where influencers openly communicate with followers, parasocial relationships are intensified, fostering feelings of familiarity, reciprocity, and symbolic intimacy. These relationships make followers more receptive to recommendations, encourage trust, and reduce skepticism (Hu et al., 2019). Due to their accessible communication style, micro-influencers tend to stimulate stronger parasocial bonds than celebrities, whose may feel more distant.

Brand trust plays a central role in shaping consumer evaluations of foreign beauty brands. It reflects consumers' willingness to rely on a brand's competence and integrity (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Given the perceived risk and uncertainty associated with skincare, brand trust is a critical driver of both adoption and recommendation (Erdem & Swait, 2004). When consumers encounter unfamiliar or culturally distant products, they often rely on intermediaries to interpret quality cues (Mim et al., 2022). Influencers thus act as trust brokers who mediate consumers' assessments of foreign brands.

Purchase intention reflects the likelihood that consumers will buy or recommend a

product. It is shaped by both cognitive factors, such as brand credibility, and emotional factors (identification and relational closeness) (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2015). Source credibility plays a central role in this process: when consumers trust the endorser, they become more likely to accept the brand's value proposition (Ganguly et al., 2010).

Theoretical foundations suggest that micro-influencers should outperform celebrity influencers and traditional advertising in shaping consumer evaluations. Their domain expertise, transparency, and relational closeness facilitate trust transfer and strengthen behavioral intention. Celebrity endorsements, while effective in some markets, may not generate meaningful increases in trust or purchase intention in low-context cultural environments when domain expertise is lacking. Based on this foundation, the study proposes that influencer type affects brand trust and purchase intention. The hypotheses are:

H1a. Micro-influencers generate higher brand trust than the control condition. H1b. Celebrity influencers generate higher brand trust than the control condition. H1c. Micro-influencers generate higher brand trust than celebrity influencers. H2a. Micro-influencers generate higher purchase intention than the control condition. H2b. Celebrity influencers generate higher purchase intention than the control condition. H2c. Micro-influencers generate higher purchase intention than celebrity influencers.

3. Method

To examine how influencer type shapes consumer perceptions of K-Beauty brands in the U.S., we conducted a randomized between-subjects experiment with three experimental conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three stimuli: (1) a micro-influencer endorsing a K-Beauty product, (2) a celebrity influencer endorsing the same product, or (3) a control advertisement featuring no influencer. The stimuli were designed to maintain consistency across all visual and textual components except for the identity of the endorser, allowing for controlled comparisons of causal impact.

After exposure to the assigned stimulus, participants completed a survey assessing brand trust and purchase intention, followed by questions on familiarity with skincare, social media habits, and demographics. Brand trust was measured using items adapted from Erdem and Swait (2004) and Ganguly et al. (2010), capturing perceptions of brand honesty, integrity, and reliability. Purchase intention was measured using two items reflecting the likelihood to purchase and the likelihood to recommend. All items used 7-point Likert-type scales, and reliability analyses confirmed internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$ for brand trust; $\alpha = .79-.80$ for purchase intention).

Data were collected through Picky, a global social-commerce platform widely used by

skincare enthusiasts. The decision to recruit through Picky was driven by its alignment with typical K-Beauty consumers and its active U.S. user base. The final sample consisted of 154 valid participants after excluding incomplete responses and individuals who failed attention checks. The sample exhibited relevance to the target demographic: 72% identified as female, 22% as male, and 6% preferred not to disclose. The average age was 27, and participants reported high levels of social media engagement, with 82% using social media multiple times daily and 78% regularly using TikTok or Instagram.

All analyses were conducted in RStudio. Normality and variance homogeneity were confirmed, supporting the use of parametric tests. One-way ANOVAs tested the effect of influencer type on both dependent variables. Tukey's HSD post hoc tests assessed pairwise differences across the three conditions. Effect sizes were estimated using η^2 , following conventions established by Cohen (1988, 1992).

4. Results

Results indicated a significant main effect of influencer type on brand trust, $F(2,151) = 6.34, p = .002$, with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = .08$). Micro-influencers generated higher trust scores than both celebrity and control conditions. A significant main effect also emerged for purchase intention, $F(2,151) = 17.97, p < .001$, with a large effect size ($\eta^2 = .19$). Micro-influencers again outperformed the other conditions, while celebrity endorsements did not differ significantly from the control stimulus. The results confirm that micro-influencers have a significantly stronger impact on both brand trust and purchase intention than celebrity influencers. Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics and reliability assessments confirmed the strength and coherence of the measurement scales. Normality and homogeneity assumptions supported the use of one-way ANOVA.

The first hypothesis proposed that influencer type would significantly affect brand trust. The ANOVA supported this prediction, revealing that participants exposed to the micro-influencer reported notably higher trust in the brand. Post hoc analyses confirmed that the micro-influencer was significantly more effective than both the celebrity condition and the control advertisement. These findings validate the theoretical claim that micro-influencers' perceived expertise and authenticity enhance consumers' trust in unfamiliar brands.

The absence of significant differences between the celebrity and control conditions suggests that celebrity endorsements may not be effective in categories characterized by high perceived risk and high need for specialized knowledge. Consumers may perceive celebrities as lacking diagnostic expertise or possessing incentives to endorse products for commercial reasons rather than authentic usage.

The second hypothesis proposed that influencer type would significantly affect purchase intention. This prediction was also supported, with micro-influencer content generating substantially higher purchase intention scores than both alternative conditions. Again, celebrity endorsements did not outperform traditional advertising. The large effect size observed ($\eta^2 = .19$) indicates that micro-influencers exert substantial influence over consumers' actual behavioral intentions.

Together, these results demonstrate a consistent persuasive advantage for micro-influencers in the K-Beauty context among U.S. consumers. The alignment between trust and behavioral outcomes underscores the central role of authenticity, expertise, and relational closeness in shaping consumer responses to influencer marketing in cross-cultural settings.

Discussion

The present study advances current understanding of influencer marketing by showing that micro-influencers are significantly more effective than celebrity endorsers in shaping trust-based and behavioral outcomes in the U.S. K-Beauty market. These findings provide empirical support for the mechanisms proposed by Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953) and Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), while offering new insights into how cultural context mediates the effectiveness of influencer strategies.

In line with Source Credibility Theory, micro-influencers' domain-specific expertise and honest communication style play a decisive role in persuading consumers. Because micro-influencers often engage in detailed tutorials, ingredient breakdowns, and routine-based education, behaviors frequently documented in influencer–consumer interaction literature (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Almahdi et al., 2022), consumers perceive them as more competent and more intrinsically motivated to provide accurate evaluations. This perceived expertise is important in skincare, where uncertainty is high and consumers rely heavily on trusted sources to interpret signals of quality and performance (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

Parasocial interaction further strengthens the persuasive advantage of micro-influencers. Their consistent presence on social media, frequent interaction with followers, and informal tone help foster symbolic intimacy and perceived relational proximity (Hu et al., 2019). These perceived relationships increase message acceptance and reduce skepticism, making micro-influencers particularly influential in shaping consumer attitudes toward unfamiliar or foreign brands, an effect especially relevant for K-Beauty introductions in the U.S. (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The limited effectiveness of celebrity endorsements in this study aligns with research suggesting that visibility-based persuasion is insufficient when consumers expect domain-

specific knowledge or transparency (Schouten et al., 2019). Celebrities may not provide the level of informational specificity or authenticity required to build trust in sensitive categories such as skincare. Moreover, cultural differences may weaken the transferability of celebrity-based strategies from Korea to the United States. While Korean consumers may be more receptive to authority-driven or aspirational messaging due to high-context communication norms (Hofstede, 2001), U.S. consumers tend to prioritize transparency, peer-like communication, and explicit informational cues. This contrast supports recent analyses showing that K-Beauty brands expanding globally increasingly emphasize education, clarity, and ingredient-based narratives (Villena & Hu, 2023).

The findings highlight that influencer marketing strategies must be culturally calibrated to maximize effectiveness. K-Beauty brands entering Western markets may benefit from prioritizing micro-influencers whose communication style aligns with U.S. consumers' expectations for authenticity and information-rich content. Rather than relying on celebrity endorsements that succeed in high-context environments, Western-facing campaigns may require endorsers who function as cultural interpreters and educators, as seen in prior analyses of influencer-mediated K-Beauty communication (Shim et al., 2024).

These insights contribute to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study integrates credibility and relational dynamics in a cross-cultural context, offering a more nuanced understanding of how consumers evaluate influencers in foreign brand settings. Practically, the findings suggest that K-Beauty brands, and foreign beauty brands more broadly, should carefully consider influencer type when entering low-context cultural markets, prioritizing endorsers who combine diagnostic content, symbolic proximity, and transparent communication.

5. Final Considerations

This study demonstrates that micro-influencers are significantly more effective than celebrity influencers in generating brand trust and purchase intention for K-Beauty products among U.S. consumers. By providing controlled experimental evidence in a cross-cultural setting, the study extends current literature on influencer effectiveness and sheds light on how credibility, authenticity, and relational closeness shape persuasive outcomes. The results suggest that micro-influencers function not only as product promoters but as cultural intermediaries who help U.S. consumers interpret foreign beauty rituals, ingredients, and product functions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the experiment employed a single product category and a single set of influencer archetypes, which may limit generalizability.

Second, the controlled stimuli did not replicate the full complexity of social media environments, including algorithmic exposure, community interaction, and user-generated feedback. Third, the sample was recruited through a platform with high affinity for skincare, potentially introducing selection bias. Finally, the study focused exclusively on U.S. consumers, and future research should explore whether similar patterns emerge in other cultural contexts.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring additional influencer types, such as estheticians or dermatologists, or examining how algorithmic curation shapes exposure to influencer content. Longitudinal studies could investigate how trust and behavioral intention evolve over repeated exposure to influencer messaging. Qualitative research could also deepen understanding of how consumers interpret influencer cues and negotiate cultural distance in the adoption of foreign brands.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights for scholars, marketers, and brands seeking to understand how influencer marketing can facilitate the global expansion of K-Beauty. The evidence strongly suggests that micro-influencers offer a compelling and culturally congruent path for foreign beauty brands seeking to build credibility and foster behavioral engagement in Western markets.

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