The Role of Micro-community Belonging vs. Traditional Social Proof in Reducing Gen Z's Adoption Risk for Emerging Cosmetic Brands

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ABSTRACT

Title: The Role of Micro-Community Belonging Vs. Traditional Social Proof in Reducing Gen Z's Adoption Risk for Emerging Cosmetic Brands

In the current digital landscape, Gen Z consumers are reshaping consumer behavior as they are increasingly skeptical of conventional, overtly commercialized endorsers. Subsequently, emerging cosmetic brands face the challenge of mitigating perceived adoption risk to remain competitive.

This dissertation compares the influence effect of two distinct endorser types: traditional social proof vs. micro-community belonging. Specifically, the study analyzes the impact of endorser type on three source credibility factors: perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source while evaluating their effectiveness on mitigating perceived adoption risk among Gen Z consumers.

Adopting an experimental design, the study presented participants with one of two stimuli, through an online questionnaire. From the analysis of the 236 participants' responses, the empirical findings suggest that micro-community belonging significantly enhances perceptions of trustworthiness, authenticity and identification with the source compared to traditional social proof. Among these, trustworthiness emerged as the only credibility factor that significantly reduces perceived adoption risk.

These insights offer meaningful contributions to existing literature regarding Gen Z's risk mitigation when adopting new brands. Furthermore, the results are highly relevant for marketers, providing empirical evidence that trustworthy and community-based endorsers are central to reducing the inherent risk of adopting emerging cosmetic brands.

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Keywords: Micro-community Belonging, Traditional Social Proof, Generation Z, Endorser Type, Perceived Adoption Risk, Emerging Brand

SUMÁRIO

Título: O Papel das Micro-comunidades vs. Prova Social Traditional na Redução do Risco de Adoção de Marcas Emergentes de Cosméticos para a Geração Z

Neste meio digital em evolução, a geração Z redefine o comportamento de consumo, mostrando-se mais cética a fontes de informação altamente comercializadas. Assim, marcas emergentes de cosméticos enfrentam o desafio de mitigar o risco de adoção.

Este estudo investiga como dois mecanismos de influência: prova social tradicional vs. pertença a micro-comunidades, moldam as perceções dos consumidores e subsequente intenção em adotar marcas emergentes de cosméticos. O estudo analisa o impacto da fonte em três fatores de credibilidade: confiança, autenticidade e identificação com a fonte, bem como a sua eficácia na redução do risco de adoção percebido.

Numa abordagem explanatória, através de um questionário online, os participantes analisaram um de dois estímulos. A análise das 236 respostas dos participantes propõe que a pertença a micro-comunidades aumente significativamente as perceções de confiança, autenticidade e identificação com a fonte, comparando com a prova social tradicional. Destes, apenas o fator confiança reduziu significativamente o risco de adoção percebido.

Assim, esta investigação contribui para a literatura existente sobre os comportamentos de mitigação de risco da Geração Z. Complementarmente, para o mercado, oferece evidências empíricas de que fontes confiáveis e com sentido de comunidade são cruciais para reduzir o risco inerente à adoção de marcas emergentes de cosméticos.

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Palavras-Chave: Micro-comunidades, Prova Social Tradicional, Geração Z, Tipo de Fonte, Risco de Adoção Percebido, Marcas Emergentes

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GLOSSARY

DV: Dependent Variable

IV: Independent Variable

M1: Mediator 1

M2: Mediator 2

M3: Mediator 3

H: Hypothesis

RQ: Research Question

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The cosmetics industry has been facing continuous growth worldwide, with greater competition from both established players and emerging brands. According to Petruzzi (2025), cosmetics' revenue should rise steadily by $30 billion over the period from 2024 to 2030, reflecting a clear upward trend. Moreover, the cosmetics market is characterized by high competitiveness and rapid innovation, where consumer preferences and expectations are constantly changing (Ustymenko, 2023). In this sense, Gen Z consumers are being increasingly targeted by emerging players, for their impactful presence online that is shaping consumer trends. Furthermore, in the beauty industry, consumers often face uncertainty regarding product quality, safety and suitability, which requires companies to strengthen brand communication and trust mechanisms (Wang, 2022). Hence, despite their potential, emerging beauty brands are challenged by consumers' perception of adoption risk, mainly due to the absence of credibility.

For the past years, traditional social proof in the digital environment, which refers to cues such as reviews, testimonials and visible popularity indicators that signal others' approval, has been an important mechanism in reducing consumer uncertainty and helped consumers validate their purchase decisions. Consumers interpret aggregated review metrics as social validation cues that signal quality and reliability, thereby reducing perceived functional and psychological risk (Amblee & Bui, 2011). Besides, when people are uncertain, they rely on other's behavior to decide what's correct (Cialdini, 1993). Furthermore, consumers' growing skepticism toward traditional marketing has made it increasingly difficult for firms to attract and influence consumers (Leung et al., 2022).

Micro-community belonging is gaining relevance due to its outcomes on brand adoption, as consumers validate one another's choices in small, niche online groups. Micro-communities allow consumers to co-create and negotiate brand meanings, reflecting active participation and mutual influence rather than passive consumption (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In brand communities, people form enduring social bonds that add value by sustaining a common identity or experience (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Unlike traditional social proof, which relies on volume and visibility, micro-community belonging emphasizes depth of connection, shared identity and authentic interactions. Brand communities make consumer sociality into a source of both use and exchange value, providing help and support in using the products associated with the brand (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Such communities provide members

with validation that feels authentic and peer-driven trust, which may be influential in cosmetics adoption.

When engaging with brands, authenticity and trust are critical values for Gen Z. This generation has a preference for genuine validation over mass approval (Haenlein et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2023). They prioritize brands and communities that align with their identity and values, often dismissing traditional mass-marketing strategies in favor of peer-driven, authentic connections. McKinsey & Company (2018) stated that this is the first generation of true digital natives, with the search for truth at the center of its characteristic behavior and consumption patterns. Moreover, Gen Z uses social media as search engines for discovering brands and rely on these platforms for information, validation and purchase decisions (Nugroho et al., 2022).

Finally, there is limited empirical analysis on micro-community belonging in the context of cosmetics adoption, specifically among Gen Z, despite extensive research on social proof. This gap emphasizes the relevance and need to compare these two mechanisms directly, to understand which is more effective in reducing perceived adoption risk of emerging cosmetic brands. Addressing this unexplored question will grant academic knowledge on consumer behavior while offering empirical insights for emerging cosmetic brands seeking to engage Gen Z consumers in meaningful ways.

1.2 Problem Statement

This research aims to assess whether an endorser that leverages micro-community belonging reduces adoption risk more effectively than traditional social proof among Gen Z consumers when considering emerging cosmetic brands. Moreover, it also seeks to understand which source credibility factors help mitigate adoption risk for these consumers.

The following research questions were developed, in order to support the problem statement:

Research Question 1: *Do Gen Z consumers have different perceptions about the credibility of the endorser type, when comparing traditional social proof with micro-community belonging?*

Research Question 2: *Does the credibility of the source (evaluated by trustworthiness, authenticity and identification with the source) influence Gen Z consumers' perception of adoption risk in the context of emerging cosmetic brands?*

Research Question 3: *Does micro-community belonging reduce Gen Z consumers' adoption risk more effectively than traditional social proof, in the context of emerging cosmetic brands?*

1.3 Relevance

This study addresses emerging behaviors in consumer adoption in digital contexts, specifically within the cosmetics industry.

From an academic perspective, previous research significantly explored the effectiveness of traditional social proof (De Veirman et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2022). Yet, few studies have examined how community belonging influences risk perception when adopting new brands online (Leal et al., 2013; Farivar & Wang, 2022). Therefore, building on Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Friedman & Friedman, 1979), Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1993) and Brand Community Theory (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), this study contributes to academia by exploring whether digital peer-driven communities may be more effective than mass validation in driving adoption for Gen Z consumers, which are reshaping traditional marketing assumptions.

From a managerial perspective, studies show that consumer trust and authenticity are crucial for emerging brands (Kumar et al., 2016; Felix et al., 2024). Besides, the Social Identity Theory (Farivar & Wang, 2022) shows that followers' identification with the community has a strong effect on purchase intention. These insights are relevant for emerging cosmetic brands striving to develop credibility in a saturated market dominated by established players. Hence, with this study, marketers can understand if resource allocation should be directed for digital influencers with mass validation metrics or focused to build intimate micro-communities that nurture trust, authenticity and identification, which are critical to achieve sustainable growth when targeting Gen Z.

1.4 Research Methodology

A combination of primary and secondary data sources have been used, to address the research questions. The research begins with an extensive review of existing literature on the topic, including industry and marketing studies as well as academic journals and articles, that shaped the subsequent stages of data collection and analysis.

Next, a quantitative experimental study was conducted, which enabled hypothesis testing and provided statistical evidence on the effectiveness of micro-community belonging vs. traditional social proof in reducing perceived adoption risk of emerging cosmetic brands among Gen Z.

The study focused exclusively on Gen Z consumers, as they represent both a core market for cosmetics and a demographic highly influenced by digital endorsers. Thus, this approach was considered suitable as it expresses consumers' digital behavior in realistic contexts while ensuring a broad reach within the target population.

1.5 Dissertation Outline

This dissertation begins with the introduction of the research problem, the relevance of the study and the research methods employed.

The next chapter discloses a thorough review of the existing literature, establishing the theoretical foundation for the empirical study by exploring concepts such as perceived adoption risk, social proof and the role of micro-communities in shaping consumer behavior.

Then, the third chapter details the research methodology. The overall research design is described, along with the data preparation process, sampling strategy and statistical approach applied to examine the data.

The findings obtained from the empirical research are presented in the fourth chapter, with results gathered from the interpretation and analysis of the data.

Finally, the last chapter presents the dissertation's conclusion. There is a summary of the main findings, implications and recognized limitations. Also, there are recommendations for further studies on consumer adoption in the cosmetics industry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A review of the existing literature and academic research on the subject of our study is provided in this chapter. By combining and analyzing existing knowledge, this review grants the foundation to develop the hypotheses and further define the conceptual framework.

2.1 Adoption Risk in Consumer Behavior

Perceived risk can be considered a function of the uncertainty about the potential outcomes of a behavior and the possible unpleasantness of these outcomes (Forsythe & Shi, 2003). Zulfikar et al. (2025) stated that higher levels of uncertainty can act as a barrier to purchase intentions, especially for consumers who are highly engaged in the product. Also adding that, perceived uncertainty plays a vital role in shaping consumer purchase intentions across different product categories and contexts. In this sense, adoption risk is a specific expression of perceived risk in the context of the innovation adoption process.

Forsythe & Shi (2003) provided a perceived-risk framework that identified perceived financial risk as the most consistent predictor of internet consumer behavior. When choosing new brands, consumers may perceive heightened financial risk due to uncertainty over product performance and potential waste (Mitchell & Boustani, 1993). Nevertheless, Mitchell & Boustani (1993) grounded in Perceived Risk Theory (Bauer, 1960), highlight that the kind of risk perceived also depends on the consumer.

Regarding adoption risk in digital contexts, Forsythe & Shi (2003) found that the ability to judge product quality online may be limited by barriers to touching, feeling, trying the product, inaccurate product colors and insufficient information, resulting in increased product performance risk.

Thus, adoption risk is closely linked to consumer's desire in adopting emerging brands. Mitchell & Boustani (1993) argue that consumers' risk perceptions influence their willingness to trial innovations and adopt products from unfamiliar brands. Since it involves a significant amount of risk on the part of the consumer, the marketeer needs to be aware of the risk perceived by non-purchasers, if he is to change those perceptions and facilitate purchase. Therefore, reducing uncertainty should be an essential strategy for sellers looking to increase purchase intentions among consumers (Zulfikar et al., 2025).

Currently, in order to manage adoption risk, consumers demand transparent and trustworthy communication sources. As suggested by the Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) source credibility affects opinion change and further adoption, significantly related to the trustworthiness of the source used in the communication. Similarly, as stated by Leung et al. (2022) consumers' growing skepticism toward traditional marketing has made it increasingly difficult for firms to attract and influence consumers. Therefore, managers must address the specific risks perceived by target customers and implement clear strategies to reduce these (Mitchell & Boustani, 1993).

2.2 Traditional Social Proof

In order for marketers to manage the risks perceived by consumers in adopting emerging brands, traditional social proof cues may be a useful and strategic tool. The Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1993) defines social proof as a psychological shortcut: when people are uncertain, they rely on others' behavior to decide what's correct. Besides, according to Mitchell & Boustani (1993), social risk stems from fear that product choices may result in social disapproval; thus, social proof cues play a vital role in risk reduction. In this sense, social proof is most influential when decision makers are uncertain about the value of a course of action and when they are able to observe the actions of similar others (Rao et al., 2001). Talib & Saat (2017) further stated that the force that influences our day to day decisions is known as social proof, while Vrontis et al. (2021) surmised that social proof reduces adoption risk by increasing trust and perceived credibility.

2.2.1 Forms of Traditional Social Proof

For this study, traditional social proof is examined mainly in its digital formats. According to Talib & Saat (2017) social proof is prominent on social networks, hence these techniques are generally effective at increasing consumer trust on online purchase; since people determine what is correct by observing what others do (Cialdini, 1993).

Celebrity endorsement is one of the main digital cues of traditional social proof. A celebrity endorser is an individual who is known to the public for his or her achievements in areas other than the product class endorsed (Friedman & Friedman, 1979). Campbell & Farrell (2020) further declared that a celebrity now uses their social media presence to support their careers and propagate brand partnerships while being leveraged by brands for their large follower base. Within this framework, Djafarova & Rushworth (2016) state that celebrity endorsement appeals

to a common reference group with the purpose to add value to a brand name and product offering, since they are able to transform an unknown product into a well-known product through persuasion techniques and generating positive associations via advertisements. The study on endorser effectiveness by Friedman & Friedman (1979) revealed that celebrity status acts as a social proof cue that signals brand legitimacy and aspirational value.

Similar to other communication strategies, firms use influencer marketing to communicate and deliver value to consumers, in the pursuit of favorable firm outcomes (Leung et al., 2022). Influencer marketing, in which companies sponsor social media personalities to promote their brands, has exploded in popularity in recent years (Tian et al., 2023).

Mega-influencers are described as the highest rank in the categorization of influencers on social networks, with a heterogeneous audience of more than a million followers (Karakaš & Zovko, 2024). Besides, macro-influencers' followers range from 100,000 and 1 million, with an audience usually tied to one specific topic, which enables strong engagement rates and substantial brand exposure (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Karakaš & Zovko, 2024). Thus, influencer marketing today represents one of the most effective forms of digital promotion, primarily because consumers perceive influencers as credible sources of information rather than traditional advertisers (Karakaš & Zovko, 2024).

Vrontis et al. (2021) inferred that influencers operate as modern opinion leaders, affecting consumer attitudes through credibility, expertise and trustworthiness. Therefore, firms are naturally interested in collaborating with such creators to ensure their content is endorsed by users trusted by others and diffused to a broad audience (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Moreover, according to Leung et al. (2022), consumers interpret the number of followers and likes as indicators of social endorsement. Tian et al. (2023) refines this acknowledgment by stating that a larger follower base serves as a heuristic for credibility and popularity, signaling to consumers that the influencer is widely trusted and followed. The amount of followers, fans, views and likes offered by social networks are among important and effective tools to affect others' perception about the sellers, since a high number of followers is a signal of legitimacy and trustworthiness (Talib & Saat, 2017).

Nevertheless, traditional social proof also involves observable popularity cues such as ratings, reviews and follower counts (Amblee & Bui, 2011). Amblee & Bui (2011) built on Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1993) demonstrating that review volume and valence are powerful

informational signals helping consumers evaluate product credibility and quality, in environments of asymmetric information. The adoption of one alternative becomes more likely the more others have made the same choice (Rao et al., 2001).

2.2.2 Traditional Social Proof and Adoption Risk

Having reviewed how adoption risk influences consumers and the existing traditional social proof methods, it is relevant to assess if there is any relationship between these two variables.

When making a buying decision, many people need proof that a seller and its product are legitimate (Talib & Saat, 2017). Cialdini (1993) inferred that traditional forms of influence such as reviews, follower counts, celebrity and influencer endorsement provide heuristic cues that reduce uncertainty in purchases. Especially when we are uncertain, we are willing to place an enormous amount of trust in the collective knowledge of the crowd (Cialdini, 1993).

In this sense, Amblee & Bui (2011) understand that consumers interpret aggregated review metrics as social validation cues that signal quality and reliability, thereby reducing perceived functional and psychological risk.

Likewise, drawing on Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) Friedman & Friedman (1979) support the role of celebrity and influencers as modern endorsers, using their expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness as cues that reduce perceived functional and psychological risk in product adoption. As such, Singer et al. (2023) found that consumers look for influencers they feel they can trust, with the majority of their study's participants stating that they trust influencers over brands. Similarly, Leung et al. (2022) uncovered that influencer marketing drives consumer engagement and credibility, which are central to reducing uncertainty and adoption risk for emerging brands.

Although, there are several limitations that arise when using traditional social proof to reduce adoption risk. Reliance on heuristics such as social proof can often lead to overvaluation of the choice and regret about the decision (Rao et al., 2001).

De Veirman et al. (2017), based on Cialdini's (1993) Social Proof Theory, shows that while popularity boosts visibility, it can simultaneously undermine perceived authenticity, reducing persuasive effectiveness while evoking perceptions of over-commercialization. Herein, Leung et al. (2022) exposes the limitations of traditional endorsement strategies such as overexposure and skepticism, while underlining influencer fatigue and the audience's awareness of

persuasion, leading to declining trust in social proof cues. As found by Haenlein et al. (2020), a large following or high engagement numbers alone are no longer sufficient; credibility now depends on perceived authenticity and value alignment. In this sense, simple quantitative measures cannot be relied on exclusively, since such measures can easily be biased, by purchasing fake followers or automated likes (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Hence, Tian et al. (2023) emphasize that mass approval signals are insufficient to reduce perceived risk and that authenticity must complement visibility. Therefore, there's a current shift from mass approval to authentic validation in reducing perceived adoption risk.

While De Veirman et al. (2017) underscores that mass approval signals are losing effectiveness; recent research emphasizes authenticity, trustworthiness and parasocial interaction as key mediators of influencer effectiveness, offsetting skepticism towards over-commercialization (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016; Singer et al., 2023; Karakaš & Zovko, 2024). Haenlein et al. (2020) further states that being authentic is crucial for success, whereas what is relevant is not the size of the follower base but the fact that the influencer can connect to a community and inspire this community to take action based on his or her recommendations. Thus, marketing managers should carefully consider all of the components, looking beyond reach and engagement metrics (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

2.3 Micro-community Belonging

The Brand Community Theory was pioneered by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), stating that a brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It allows consumers to co-create and negotiate brand meanings, reflecting active participation and mutual influence rather than passive consumption. McAlexander et al. (2002) acknowledges brand community as customer-centered, building on the idea that relationships are at the heart of both consumption and community. Algesheimer et al. (2005) further defined brand community identification as a psychological connection between consumers and the community that represents both cognitive agreement with shared values and emotional attachment to other members.

According to Arvidsson & Caliandro (2015), brand communities build on sustained forms of interaction or consistent collective identity, providing a useful foundation for understanding how social interaction can become a source of value. In this sense, micro-communities are smaller, interactional and identity-based groups that provide deeper peer validation and trust.

Consumers are no longer passive recipients of brand messages but active participants who share, comment and influence others' perceptions (Binwani & Ho, 2019). Thus, social media is an ideal environment for building brand communities because of its networked, interactive nature, in which users belong to various online social groups and virtual communities (De Veirman et al., 2017; Habibi et al., 2014). Hence, the proposed community paradigm offers an opportunity for brand managers to change their thinking about the process of managing brands in the digital era (Quinton, 2012).

2.3.1 Forms of Micro-communities

In this study, micro-community belonging is examined mainly in its digital formats, since this is an emerging consumer behavior leveraged by platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These platforms have become essential for brands to engage with diverse audiences (Felix et al., 2024).

Followers' perceptions relating to the influencer community can significantly affect their attitudes and intentions toward the influencer's message and purchase recommendations (Farivar & Wang, 2022). Moreover, engagement elasticity declines as follower size increases, meaning that micro-influencers generate stronger trust and behavioral responses (Tian et al., 2023).

Micro-influencers' audience tends to be more localized to their geographic base with follower counts between 10,000 and 100,000, helping them to connect with their followers and heighten their perceived accessibility and authenticity (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Similarly, nano-influencers are individuals who have organically experienced a growth in followers through ordinary social media behavior, often generating the highest engagement rates of all influencer categories. Key factors include their ability to form deeper connections with their audience and their perceived authenticity (Felix et al., 2024).

Moreover, niche online communities are fostering consumer interactions and behaviors. Habibi et al. (2014) disclosed that social media-based brand communities influence brand trust, since community engagement strengthens the connection among community ties and brand trust. Consumers shape trends through communal validation and collective identity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Communities are created when customers interact with one another in ways that foster shared consciousness and mutual support (McAlexander et al., 2002). Hence,

through their presence on social networks, brands create communities where users share information about their products and services (Karakaš & Zovko, 2024).

Within this context, peer-to-peer content is outweighing mass approval techniques, since consumers tend to attribute higher credibility to other consumers' opinions rather than to companies' communications (Leal et al., 2013). Friedman & Friedman's (1979) study revealed that typical consumers can also be persuasive, where in some product classes it is equally or more effective than a celebrity or expert. Messages on social media from peers are perceived to be more credible compared with traditional advertising (Sokolova & Perez, 2020). Furthermore, Tian et al. (2023) concluded that emerging brands gain more credibility and trial willingness through authentic, peer-like voices. Considering these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: *Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived trustworthiness of the source more than traditional social proof.*

H1b: *Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived authenticity of the source more than traditional social proof.*

H1c: *Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' identification with the source more than traditional social proof.*

2.3.2 Micro-communities and Adoption Risk

To evaluate the emerging importance of micro-community belonging in consumer adoption, it is relevant to assess if there is any relationship between that variable and adoption risk.

Micro-communities can be defined as digital relationship ecosystems that foster emotional attachment, authenticity and trust, which are key features in reducing perceived adoption risk (Kumar et al., 2016). Specifically, Friedman & Friedman (1979) affirm that trustworthiness is probably the major dimension underlying source credibility; while Leal et al. (2013) provided strong empirical evidence that trust developed within virtual communities reduces uncertainty, ultimately influencing purchasing decisions.

Moreover, De Veirman et al. (2017) found that for emerging brands, collaborating with influencers who have fewer followers but great credibility yields stronger brand attitudes, supporting the assumption that authenticity-based validation increasingly replaces mass

approval as a risk-reduction cue. In this sense, when content creators are perceived as authentic, their brand endorsements are more likely to be perceived as genuine reflections of their personal beliefs (Walsh et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Farivar & Wang (2022) introduced the Social Identity Theory to influencer marketing, showing empirically that followers' identification with the community has a stronger impact on purchase intention. Identification occurs when individuals conform to the attitude or behavior advocated by another person because these individuals derive satisfaction from the belief that they are like that person (Friedman & Friedman, 1979). Simultaneously, Algesheimer et al. (2005) demonstrated that smaller and more cohesive communities foster stronger identification and mutual influence, making communities central to brand engagement and loyalty formation. This perceived similarity fosters authenticity and emotional closeness, mechanisms that reduce uncertainty when trying new products (Sokolova & Perez, 2020).

Nevertheless, depth of belonging and community validation also reduces uncertainty. Brand communities represent an important information resource for consumers, since they often strengthen interpersonal ties and foster a sense of belonging (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). McAlexander et al. (2002) reinforce this idea by stating that participation in brand communities increases trust in the brand and strengthens brand loyalty. Likewise, Kumar et al. (2016) highlight that social connectedness and meaningful interaction amplify persuasion and trust. Thus, members rely on shared experiences and communal expertise to evaluate new products, effectively reducing perceived functional and psychological risks (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

In conclusion, trust in micro-communities shape consumers' brand perceptions. McAlexander et al. (2002) showed that community participation enhances trust and belonging; while Leal et al. (2013) revealed that participation in virtual communities affects consumer purchasing decisions through information exchange and trust among members. In this sense, McAlexander et al. (2002) further suggest that engagement within micro-communities can mitigate perceived risk and foster loyalty.

Given what was previously stated, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: *Perceived trustworthiness of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.*

H2b: *Perceived authenticity of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.*

H2c: *Identification with the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.*

H2d: *The effect of endorser type on perceived adoption risk is mediated by perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source.*

2.4 Generation Z

Gen Z are a distinct digital-native cohort whose formative experiences with social media, shape their attitudes toward communication, identity and consumption (Yadav & Rai, 2017). Commonly defined as individuals born between 1996 and 2010, they are most active on platforms like TikTok and Instagram where short-form, visually engaging content and viral trends drive their attention (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z are more likely to seek product or service information through digital content, such as user reviews, short videos and interactive campaigns (Maulana et al., 2025). This generation uses social media as search engines for discovering brands and rely on these platforms for information, validation and purchase decisions (Nugroho et al., 2022). Hence, to design relevant communication strategies that align with their interactive and participatory nature, marketers must understand Gen Z's social media habits (Yadav & Rai, 2017).

2.4.1 Generation Z and Adoption Risk

Gen Z consumers are particularly attuned to commercial manipulation and interpret excessive visibility as inauthentic, leading to influencer fatigue and skepticism toward traditional social proof (De Veirman et al., 2017). According to Das & Mishra (2022), this generation often seeks values such as honesty and transparency when engaging with content. As a consequence, these consumers have a preference for genuine validation over mass approval (Haenlein et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2023). According to Nugroho et al. (2022), Gen Z is replacing traditional social proof for more authentic, honest and credible sources.

In this sense, Gen Z values authenticity and transparency, favoring brands that offer genuine storytelling and user-generated content over traditional advertising (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). They trust recommendations from influencers or organic content more than conventional advertising (Maulana et al., 2025). Similarly, Ninan et al. (2020) inferred that Gen Z's digital-first mindset amplifies the role of authentic social validation in reducing adoption risk.

Therefore, micro-communities represent digital spaces where Gen Z consumers form affective bonds with brands through continuous interaction, which decrease perceived adoption risk. As stated by De Pelsmacker & Neijens (2012), micro-communities mitigate adoption risk by

embedding brand information within trusted peer interactions that bypass overt persuasion cues. Moreover, Kumar et al. (2016) findings on authenticity, responsiveness and transparency in social media resonates with Gen Z's demand for value-aligned brand communication.

2.5 The Cosmetic Market Context

The cosmetics market is characterized by high competitiveness and rapid innovation, where consumer preferences and expectations are constantly evolving (Ustymenko, 2023). Forsythe & Shi's (2003) findings that financial and product performance risk deter purchase support the idea that emerging cosmetic brands face amplified adoption risk.

In the beauty industry, consumers often face uncertainty regarding product quality, safety and suitability, which requires companies to strengthen brand communication and trust mechanisms (Wang, 2022). Trust plays a crucial role in determining purchase intention for cosmetic products, as consumers are highly concerned about product quality and authenticity, particularly in the absence of physical product trials (Binwani & Ho, 2019). In this sense, social networks make it possible to form communities of brand fans who share reviews, impressions and recommendations, which in turn increases the level of trust in the brand (Ustymenko, 2023). Thus, advertisers should carefully match the type of endorser with the nature of the product and the audience characteristics to achieve maximum credibility and impact (Friedman & Friedman, 1979).

Based on what was previously said, we hypothesize that:

H3: *The effect of micro-community belonging on perceived adoption risk, through perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source is stronger than the effect of traditional social proof.*

2.6 Conceptual Framework

The upcoming figure represent the relationship between the variables, specifically the process through which endorser type affect consumer perceived adoption risk, when this effect is channeled through source credibility factors:

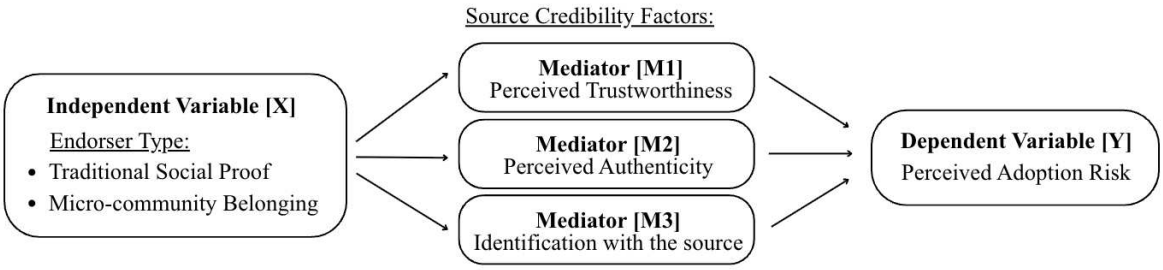

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework is based on the idea that the impact of endorser type on perceived adoption risk is not direct but it comes through psychological source credibility factors.

Using the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and Brand Community Theory (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), the model suggests that belonging to a micro-community and traditional social proof influence consumers' adoption risk perceptions. They shape how credible, authentic and relatable the source seems.

This mediated configuration is especially important for emerging cosmetic brands, where brand information is scarce and consumers depend greatly on interpersonal and social cues to feel less uncertain.

Additionally, the model theorizes that the effectiveness of micro-community belonging compared to traditional social proof results from differences in theses credibility cues instead of a direct persuasive edge. Therefore, the proposed framework considers superiority as an indirect effect, expressing that micro-community belonging has a stronger ability to build trust among Gen Z consumers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed to address the research questions and test the respective hypotheses is outlined in this chapter. It justifies the selected research approach and explains the data preparation process and further data analysis.

3.1 Research Approach

This research aims to understand how different endorser types (traditional social proof and micro-community belonging), influence perceived adoption risk among Gen Z consumers when considering emerging cosmetic brands.

To address this goal, both secondary and primary data were collected and analyzed. The existing literature on the subjects was assessed, primarily sourced from top scientific journal articles and other relevant studies. This review provided the foundation to formulate the hypotheses and the conceptual framework.

Regarding the primary data collection, a quantitative experimental approach was employed. This allows empirical testing of the predefined hypotheses and ensures the generalizability of findings (Ghanad, 2023). Given the study's focus on measuring perceptions, attitudes and behavioral intentions, a quantitative technique was the most suitable way to measure and analyze data that could be statistically interpreted (Malhotra, 2017).

The experimental design consisted of two between-subject conditions (traditional social proof or micro-community belonging), randomly assigned to each participant through an online survey. The main advantage of experiments lies in their ability to isolate and test the effects of specific variables (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Hence, this design enables the finding of differences in perceived trustworthiness, authenticity, identification with the source and adoption risk based on the type of social influence.

The study was operationalized by carrying out an online survey through Qualtrics, which allowed for efficient data collection among the target audience. Prior to the main study, a preliminary version of the survey was conducted to identify and eliminate potential research bias. Finally, after the data collection process, the statistical analysis was developed on the IBM SPSS Statistics 30 software.

3.2 Primary Data

3.2.1 Data Collection

For data collection, an online survey was developed on Qualtrics (Appendix 1). The study adopted a non-probability sampling approach, specifically convenience and snowball sampling. Despite its convenient selection of units from the population, this approach may not represent the broader population (Ayhan, 2011).

The questionnaire was distributed from the 12th to the 21st of November 2025, mainly on digital platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, chosen for their potential to quickly reach a wide Gen Z audience. Despite aiming to reach mainly the Portuguese population, participants could choose to answer the survey in both Portuguese or English, to reduce any language constraints and allow for the participation of foreign respondents.

Beforehand, 12 participants answered a pre-test survey to ensure accuracy and content validity of the main survey. A pre-test enables the researcher to refine the survey and eliminate analytical errors (Hashim et al., 2022). The pre-test confirmed that participants were interpreting the stimuli and scales as expected, thus only minor wording and layout adjustments were made.

To allow for the hypotheses testing and variables measurement, the survey (Appendix 1) included validated scales from prior academic literature and was organized into different sections to address all relevant constructs. In the introductory section, participants were presented with 4 screening questions to ensure that all respondents belonged to the investigation target group: female Gen Z consumers that are active users of social media platforms and purchase cosmetic products. Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (traditional social proof or micro-community belonging), in which they would assess the endorsers' perceived trustworthiness, authenticity and identification with the source and further adoption risk perception. Qualtrics ensured a balanced distribution of participants across conditions. Finally, participants were asked some behavioral and demographic questions aiming to characterize the sample and provide any additional relevant information regarding consumers' behavior towards emerging cosmetic brands.

In total, 362 respondents participated in the study, from which 236 valid responses were collected after excluding incomplete or invalid cases. The data was exported from Qualtrics and analyzed through IBM SPSS Statistics 30.

3.2.2 Stimuli Development

The survey used an experimental design to measure the independent variable: endorser type (traditional social proof or micro-community belonging). This design aims to control the manipulation of the independent variables and observation of their effects on the dependent variable (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). These stimuli were represented by two distinct influencer scenarios on TikTok, a platform where Gen Z is highly engaged with.

In order to reduce potential bias related to brand image judgement, familiarity and personal preferences, the brand and creators were carefully chosen. Both stimuli featured a similar video recommending the same product from the existing emerging K-Beauty brand: Entropy, ensuring product consistency and avoiding potential brand bias, as the brand was chosen for its low recognition among participants.

The product featured in both experimental conditions is predominantly targeted and consumed by female audiences. As a result, it was considered methodologically appropriate that the survey responses were only provided by female Gen Z consumers, who represent the primary target segment for this type of cosmetic product. This alignment between the product category and the respondent profile enhances the validity of the study, as participants were exposed to a stimulus that matched their actual consumption habits.

In the traditional social proof scenario, participants were presented with a verified mass approval celebrity trying on a product of the Entropy brand, while followers reacted on the comments' section. Meanwhile, the micro-community scenario displayed a micro-influencer trying on the same product of the same brand while interacting with followers on the comments' section, generating community engagement. Both stimuli descriptions followed the same length and structure to ensure balance and differed only in aspects related to the endorser type (follower count, comments' section, number of views, likes and shares).

The pre-test (n = 12) confirmed that participants correctly perceived the two conditions, hence minor wording adjustments were made. In Figure 2 below, it is possible to observe the stimuli used.

***S1:** Traditional Social Proof*

1.1M followers

***S2:** Micro-community belonging*

37k followers

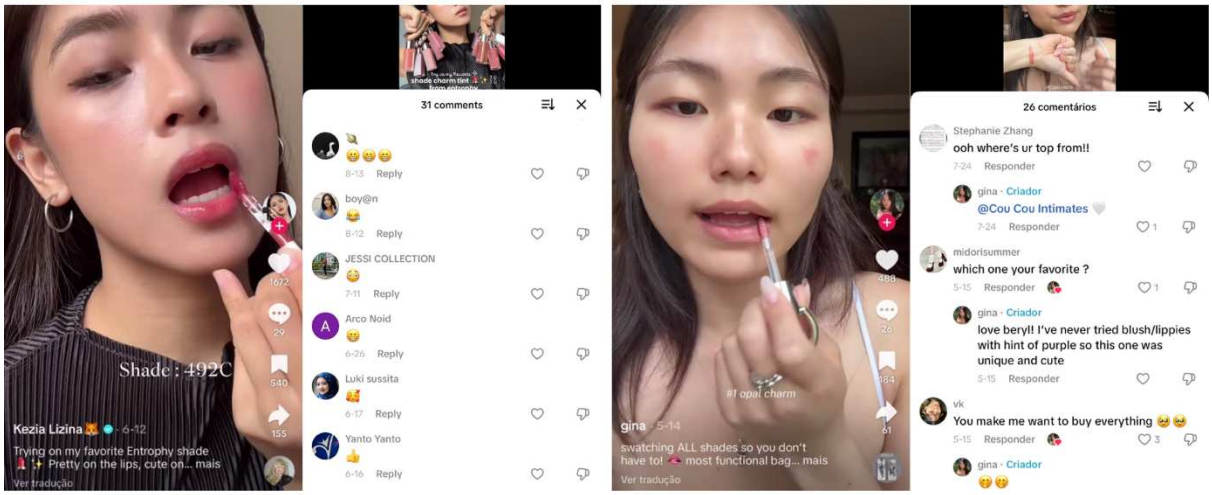

Figure 2 - Survey Stimuli

3.2.3 Measures

The online survey was designed to measure the variables presented in the conceptual framework and to test the hypotheses previously formulated. Our model's independent variable was the endorser type (traditional social proof and micro-community belonging), the mediators were perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source and, finally, the dependent variable was perceived adoption risk. The dependent variable was measured using performance, financial, social and physical risk, reflecting the key uncertainties inherent in cosmetics' adoption.

The survey included 3-6 questions per variable and each section of the questionnaire included a brief introduction to simplify the participants' role. The independent variable: endorser type, was experimentally manipulated using two stimuli conditions previously described.

All constructs were measured using validated scales from existing literature, adjusted to the context of this study to guarantee alignment on recommendation-driven brand adoption. The selection and adaptation of each scale were guided by conceptual relevance to the hypotheses and level of reliability of the measures in previous studies. Respondents rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". A 7-point scale increases the probability of meeting the objective reality of people (Joshi et al., 2015). Items were slightly reworded to fit the context of evaluating a cosmetic product endorsed by a content creator.

The outline of the measures can be found in Table 1:

Variables		***Items***	***Scale***	***Reference***	***Original Cronbach's α***
IV	Endorser Type	na	Manipulated Stimuli	na	na
Mediators	Perceived Trustworthiness	4	7-point Likert Scale	Büttner & Göritz (2008)	0.95
	Perceived Authenticity	3	7-point Likert Scale	Moulard et al. (2015)	0.87
	Identification with the source	3	7-point Likert Scale	Wang et al. (2025)	0.87
DV	Perceived Adoption Risk	6	7-point Likert Scale	Stone & Grønhaug (1993)	0.68

Table 1 – Variable Measures

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the Qualtrics questionnaire was transferred and analyzed through SPSS software version 30. First, data preparation involved looking for missing values, response inconsistencies and outliers, assuring accuracy and credibility of the study. Then, the data set was recodified into composite variables in order to transform raw responses into variables suitable to test the hypotheses.

Furthermore, the internal consistency of the variables was assessed to evaluate the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement scales. For that purpose, Cronbach's α coefficient was calculated for each construct. Besides, the data set underwent a parametric diagnosis that analyzed normality, homogeneity of variances and independence of the variables. The correlation between the predictors was also tested. Subsequently, descriptive statistics and frequencies were employed to characterize the sample and analyze consumers' digital behavior.

Then, to test the proposed hypotheses, independent samples t-tests, multiple linear regression analysis and Model 4 of the Hayes Process Macro were employed. The hypotheses were tested with a significance level of 0.05.

The outcomes were interpreted taking into consideration existing literature, allowing theoretical and managerial implications to be drawn in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter aims to analyze and interpret the outcomes of the study. A detailed quantitative data analysis was employed to characterize the sample and test the hypotheses in order to address the research questions.

4.1 Data Preparation

4.1.1 Data Cleaning

A total of 362 questionnaires were started, of which only 293 were completed, yielding an 80.94% response rate. From these answers, only 256 passed the screening questions, meaning they were female Gen Z active users of social media who purchase cosmetic products. Then, 17 participants were eliminated since they incorrectly answered the attention check question, resulting in 239 valid answers. From these, 3 outliers exceeding the critical threshold ($p < 0.001$) were eliminated using the Mahalanobis distance criteria, in order to ensure a more robust analysis. Therefore, the number of valid answers was reduced to 236, with near-equal distribution between stimuli groups: 116 for the traditional social proof group and 120 for the micro-community belonging group (Appendix 2).

4.1.2 Data Recodification

The process of data recodification was crucial for transforming raw responses into variables suitable to test the hypotheses, after excluding all invalid responses. Since participants were randomly distributed across two stimuli in this experimental study, the data set was subdivided, based on the questions each participant was exposed to.

All item scores were initially consolidated and then computed into final mean variables. Then, the core independent variable was created by recoding the randomization variable into the binary variable: 1 for traditional social proof and 0 for micro-community belonging, ensuring that each participant was accurately associated with the exposed stimulus.

4.1.3 Reliability Measures

The constructs used in this research were first validated through the existing literature. Despite that, the reliability of the constructs under analysis must be reassessed. Therefore, Cronbach's α was applied, since it is the standard coefficient for estimating the internal consistency of a scale (Cronbach, 1951). According to George & Mallery (2003), reliability coefficients above

0.7 are considered acceptable, values above 0.8 indicate strong internal consistency and values above 0.9 represent excellent reliability. Cronbach's α was estimated using the means of each scale item to assess the consistency of all constructs (Appendix 3).

The outcomes validate that all constructs met the reliability criteria of $\alpha > 0.7$ as detailed in Table 2. As a result of this internal consistency analysis, these Cronbach's α values confirm the robustness of the measures used, ensuring their quality for upcoming analyses.

Construct	***Nº of Items***	***Cronbach's α***	***Quality***
Perceived Trustworthiness	4	0.864	Strong
Perceived Authenticity	3	0.925	Excellent
Identification with the Source	3	0.877	Strong
Perceived Adoption Risk	6	0.772	Acceptable

Table 2 - Cronbach's Alpha

4.1.4 Parametric Diagnosis

It is relevant to assess whether the variables meet the underlying assumptions of parametric testing in order to select the appropriate statistical tests. This assessment is based on the assumptions of independence, normality and homogeneity of variances.

First, the assumptions of independence across groups are ensured since respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two stimuli (Appendix 2). Additionally, all variables are continuous as they were measured with a 7-point Likert Scale.

Subsequently, to assess the normal distribution of the constructs, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was employed as the sample size exceeded 50 cases. The outcomes of the formal tests indicated that most constructs had a p-value < 0.05, meaning that they did not follow a normal distribution (Appendix 4), which is common in large samples. Simultaneously, all variables satisfied the acceptance criterion of |Kurtosis|<7 and |Skewness|<3 (Appendix 4). Nevertheless, given the large sample size (N=236) and the fulfillment of the threshold of N>30, for each experimental group, the Central Limit Theorem (CLT) applies, ensuring that the distribution of sample means approximates normality.

Finally, to assess the assumption of variance homogeneity, Levene's test indicated that it was met for the majority of constructs with consistent variance across groups as p > 0.05 (Appendix

5). However, the assumption was violated for the construct "identification with the source" since p = 0.041; consequently, its results will be interpreted using the "equal variances not assumed" row, while all other constructs will rely on the "equal variances assumed" row.

Hence, the subsequent parametric analysis is robust and reliable for this study, since the variables meet the criteria for parametric testing.

4.1.5 Multicollinearity

A multicollinearity analysis was undertaken to control the results' reliability and interpretability. The analysis confirmed that the model does not suffer from multicollinearity, since the values for VIF < 5 and Tolerance > 0.100 (Appendix 6), indicating that the model is appropriate for hypothesis testing as displayed in Table 3.

Construct	***Tolerance***	***VIF***
Perceived Trustworthiness	0.356	2.808
Perceived Authenticity	0.356	2.809
Identification with the source	0.593	1.687

Table 3 - Multicollinearity between constructs

4.1.6 Manipulation Check

Brand familiarity was used as a manipulation check to confirm that the presented brand "Entropy" was accurately perceived as an emerging cosmetic brand. This measure showcased a very low score for participants' previous familiarity, experience and knowledge of the brand, since 89.4% of the final sample reported a familiarity score of 2.00 or lower on a 7-point scale (Appendix 7). Hence, this confirms that consumers were evaluating the brand based merely on the endorser cues provided in the TikTok post and not on prior brand knowledge, ensuring the integrity and robustness of the experimental design.

4.2 Sample Characterization

The final sample includes 236 valid participants, all being female Gen Z active users of social media who purchase cosmetic products (Appendix 8). Most (92.4%) participants are aged between 19 and 26 years old. Concerning education, the sample is highly qualified since 77.1% hold a Bachelor's or Master's Degree. Moreover, the employment profile suggests that 68.6%

are still students, either as full-time (50.0%) or student-workers (18.6%), while geographically, the sample is highly concentrated since 88.6% of participants are Portuguese.

Regarding the consumption habits of the target audience, the majority of respondents (64.4%) expressed openness to trying products from emerging cosmetic brands. Specifically, 47.9% stated that they sometimes try emerging cosmetic brands, while on the opposite side only 3.0% preferred to adopt established brands only. Additionally, the analysis of influence factors when adopting emerging brands indicates that the most impactful source is the suggestion or discussion within online communities or friends' groups (58.9% of cases), followed by reviews or opinions read or watched online (50.0% of cases).

Overall, the sample characterization analysis provides relevant insights into the target audience. The results align with the study's context, indicating that these young adults are highly engaged with social dynamics and open to testing new cosmetic brands, which ensures a more targeted analysis on consumer decision-making.

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

This section presents the statistical analysis of the proposed conceptual framework and subsequent relationship between the variables.

To understand if the endorser type significantly affects consumers' perceived trustworthiness of the source, authenticity of the source and identification with the source, independent sample t-tests were conducted. The essential assumptions for performing these parametric tests were previously verified in Chapter 4.1.4.

H1a: Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived trustworthiness of the source more than traditional social proof.

The H1a tests the path 'a' of the mediation model, assessing the effect of endorser type (variable X) on perceived trustworthiness (variable M1).

The statistical analysis indicates that the micro-community group (M = 4.5542) revealed a significantly higher trustworthiness mean score than the traditional social proof group (M = 3.6250), resulting in a mean difference of 0.92917 which aligns with the hypothesized scenario as displayed in Table 4. Results show that only micro-community belonging achieved a

trustworthiness mean score above the neutral midpoint (4.0), indicating that only this endorser type positively influences the consumers' perceived trustworthiness.

Endorser Type	*N*	*Mean (M)*	*Standard Deviation (SD)*
Micro-community Belonging	120	4.5542	0.93214
Traditional Social Proof	116	3.6250	1.09022

Table 4 - Group Means for Perceived Trustworthiness (H1a)

Moreover, the t-test ($t = 7.045$) yielded a p-value < 0.001 (Appendix 9). Since $p < 0.05$, the difference is statistically significant, hence H1a is supported. The micro-community belonging source significantly and positively influences consumers' perceived trustworthiness more than the traditional social proof source.

H1b: Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived authenticity of the source more than traditional social proof.

Likewise, H1b tests the path 'a' of the mediation model, examining the effect of endorser type (variable X) on perceived authenticity (variable M2) .

The statistical analysis shows that the micro-community group ($M = 4.5417$) revealed a significantly higher mean score for authenticity than the traditional social proof group ($M = 3.5316$), resulting in a mean difference of 1.01006 which aligns with the hypothesized scenario as showcased in Table 5. Results indicate that only micro-community belonging achieved an authenticity mean score above the neutral midpoint (4.0), showing that only this endorser type positively influences the consumers' perceived authenticity.

Endorser Type	*N*	*Mean (M)*	*Standard Deviation (SD)*
Micro-community Belonging	120	4.5417	1.06472
Traditional Social Proof	116	3.5316	1.16799

Table 5 - Group Means for Perceived Authenticity (H1b)

Additionally, the t-test ($t = 6.947$) yielded a p-value < 0.001 (Appendix 10). Since $p < 0.05$, the difference is statistically significant, thereby H1b is supported. The micro-community belonging source significantly and positively influences consumers' perceived authenticity more than the traditional social proof source.

H1c: Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' identification with the source more than traditional social proof.

Finally, H1c tests the path 'a' of the mediation model, analyzing the impact of endorser type (variable X) on identification with the source (variable M3). As stated in Chapter 4.1.4 the assumption of equal variances is violated for identification with the source, since Levene's $p = 0.041 < 0.05$ (Appendix 5), hence the t-test results are interpreted using the "equal variances not assumed row".

The statistical analysis indicates that the micro-community group ($M = 4.1083$) has a significantly higher mean identification with the source score than the traditional social proof group ($M = 3.3247$), resulting in a mean difference of 0.78362 which aligns with the hypothesized scenario as presented in Table 6. The results show that micro-community belonging ($M = 4.1083$) is the only endorser type that achieve a mean score above the neutral midpoint. Although this mean confirms a positive influence on identification, the proximity to the midpoint (4.0) suggests that this impact, while statistically present and superior to the traditional social proof group ($M = 3.3247$), remains relatively modest.

Endorser Type	*N*	*Mean (M)*	*Standard Deviation (SD)*
Micro-community Belonging	120	4.1083	0.10919
Traditional Social Proof	116	3.3247	0.11993

Table 6 - Group Means for Identification with the Source (H1c)

Besides, the t-test ($t = 4.831$) yielded a p-value < 0.001 (Appendix 11). Since $p < 0.05$, the difference is statistically significant, thus H1c is supported. The micro-community belonging source significantly and positively influences consumers' identification with the source more than the traditional social proof source.

Moving forward, to assess the effect of the mediators: perceived trustworthiness (variable M1), perceived authenticity (variable M2) and identification with the source (variable M3) on the dependent variable: perceived adoption risk (variable Y), a multiple linear regression test was performed. This relationship forms the essential 'b-path' of the mediation model, examining if the mediator leads to behavioral outcomes. Hence, this test allows to simultaneously assess the unique contribution of each mediator on the dependent variable. The essential assumptions for performing this parametric test were previously verified in Chapter 4.1.4.

The overall model successfully predicts perceived adoption risk, evidenced by the statistically significant ANOVA ($F(3,232) = 8.237$, $p < 0.001$) (Appendix 12). The mediators collectively account for 9.6% of the variance in risk ($R^2 = 0.096$).

Variable	*Unstandardized B*	*Standardized β*	*t*	*p-value*
Constant	4.783	na	19.564	<0.001
Perceived Trustworthiness	-0.295	-0.329	-3.150	0.002
Perceived Authenticity	-0.031	-0.038	-0.362	0.718
Identification with the source	0.074	-0.096	1.184	0.238

Table 7 - Multiple Linear Regression (H2)

H2a: Perceived trustworthiness of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.

The regression analysis indicated a coefficient B = -0.295, supporting the prediction of risk reduction and $p = 0.002 < 0.05$ meaning that the effect is statistically significant as presented in Table 7.

Therefore, H2a is supported since perceived trustworthiness has a significant negative impact on perceived adoption risk (coefficient = -0.295), confirming that increased trustworthiness is a powerful factor in reducing perceived adoption risk.

H2b: Perceived authenticity of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.

While the regression analysis indicated a coefficient B = -0.031, supporting the prediction of risk reduction, the effect was not statistically significant since $p = 0.718$, as seen in Table 7.

Contrarily to H2a, H2b is not supported since perceived authenticity does not have statistically significant impact on mitigating perceived adoption risk.

H2c: Identification with the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.

The regression analysis indicated a coefficient B = 0.074, which is contradictory to the prediction of risk reduction and $p = 0.238$ showing a non-significant effect as seen in Table 7.

Similarly to H2b, H2c is not supported since identification with the source does not significantly reduce perceived adoption risk. The result was not statistically significant and the coefficient even pointed in the direction of increasing risk.

H2d: The effect of endorser type on perceived adoption risk is mediated by perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source.

To test the effect of the endorser type (variable X) on perceived adoption risk (variable Y) simultaneously mediated by perceived trustworthiness (variable M1), perceived authenticity (variable M2) and identification with the source (variable M3), Model 4 of Hayes Process Macro was conducted.

The overall model is statistically significant ($F(4,231) = 6.1815$, $p = 0.0001$). The variables collectively account for 9.67% of the variance of perceived adoption risk ($R^2 = 0.0967$) (Appendix 13), confirming that the mediators and the endorser type significantly predict the variance in adoption risk.

	Effect	95% CI (lower)	95% CI (upper)
Total Indirect Effect	0.2568	0.1067	0.4178
Perceived Trustworthiness	0.2789	0.0948	0.4773
Perceived Authenticity	0.0351	-0.1276	0.2167
Identification with the source	-0.0572	-0.1656	0.0369

Table 8 - Indirect Effects of Model 4 - H. Process Macro (H2d)

A total indirect effect of 0.2568 and a 95% Confidence Interval that does not contain zero, denotes that the cumulative explanatory power of all mediators is positive and the mediation is statistically significant as presented in Table 8.

Thereby, H2d is supported. Yet, although the total indirect effect of endorser type on perceived adoption risk was statistically significant, the mediation process was not equally influenced by all suggested credibility factors.

Specifically, perceived trustworthiness stood out as the only mediator with a significant direct effect on perceived adoption risk. In contrast, perceived authenticity and identification with the source did not lower adoption risk on their own.

These results show a partial and trust-driven mediation. Micro-community belonging reduces perceived adoption risk mainly through increased trustworthiness, while authenticity and identification serve a more supportive and indirect role in the overall credibility framework.

H3: The effect of micro-community belonging on perceived adoption risk, through perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source is stronger than the effect of traditional social proof.

Finally, to test whether the total indirect effect of micro-community belonging in reducing perceived adoption risk is stronger than the effect of traditional social proof, Model 4 of Hayes Process Macro (Appendix 13) was performed.

The superiority of micro-community belonging was assessed by examining the magnitude and statistical significance of the indirect effect linking endorser type to perceived adoption risk through source credibility factors. The results show that the indirect impact linked to micro-community belonging is significant and meaningful. In contrast, traditional social proof does not display a similar indirect pattern.

The decision for H3 derives on the contrast of the total indirect effects. Since the difference of total indirect effects is 0.2568 (Table 8), this positive value means that the micro-community endorser type has a positive impact on the reduction of adoption risk and also confirms the superiority of micro-community belonging in reducing the risk for adoption of emerging cosmetic brands.

Since the 95% Confidence Interval (0.1067 to 0.4178) does not include zero, the total mediation process is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, because the total indirect effect is positive (0.2568) it confirms that the effect of micro-community belonging in mitigating risk is significantly stronger than the traditional social proof, so H3 is supported.

4.3.1 Hypotheses Testing Overview

Hypotheses	***Results***
H1a: *Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived trustworthiness of the source more than traditional social proof.*	Significant and Supported
H1b: *Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived authenticity of the source more than traditional social proof.*	Significant and Supported

H1c: *Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' identification with the source more than traditional social proof.*	Significant and Supported
H2a: *Perceived trustworthiness of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.*	Significant and Supported
H2b: *Perceived authenticity of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.*	Not Significant Not supported
H2c: *Identification with the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk.*	Not Significant Not supported
H2d: *The effect of endorser type on perceived adoption risk is mediated by perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source.*	Significant and Supported
H3: *The effect of micro-community belonging on perceived adoption risk, through perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source is stronger than the effect of traditional social proof.*	Significant and Supported

Table 9 - Hypotheses Testing Results

4.4 Results Discussion

Our study aimed to compare the effectiveness of two distinct types of endorsers in mitigating Gen Z consumers' perceived adoption risk when evaluating emerging cosmetic brands, for which we had formulated three main research questions.

RQ1: *Do Gen Z consumers have different perceptions about the credibility of the endorser type, when comparing traditional social proof with micro-community belonging?*

To address this question, we tested three hypotheses (H1a: Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived trustworthiness of the source more than traditional social proof, H1b: Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived authenticity of the source more than traditional social proof and H1c: Micro-community belonging positively influences the consumers' perceived identification with the source more than traditional social proof). The uniform support for all hypotheses confirms that the micro-community belonging endorser was significantly more effective at influencing consumers' perception of trustworthiness, authenticity and identification with the source compared to the traditional social proof endorser.

These findings suggest that smaller-scale creators who actively interact with their audience foster stronger relational and credibility-based perceptions among Gen Z consumers. The

significant support of H1a reveals that micro-community belonging positively influences perceived trustworthiness more than traditional social proof. This concurs with previous studies indicating that social connectedness and meaningful interaction amplify persuasion and trust (Kumar et al., 2016). Additionally, as found by Tian et al. (2023), micro-influencers generate stronger trust and behavioral responses since engagement elasticity declines as follower size increases.

The significant validation of H1b suggests that micro-community belonging enhances perceived authenticity more than traditional social proof. As stated by Haenlein et al. (2020) being authentic is crucial for success in order for the endorser to connect to a community and inspire this community to take action based on his or her recommendations. Furthermore, when content creators are perceived as authentic, their brand endorsements are more likely to be perceived as genuine reflections of their personal beliefs (Walsh et al., 2024). As such, a large following or high engagement numbers alone are no longer sufficient; credibility now depends on perceived authenticity and value alignment (Haenlein et a., 2020).

Likewise, the confirmation of H1c shows that micro-community belonging fosters higher identification with the source than traditional social proof. This finding is aligned with Algesheimer et al. (2005) who demonstrated that smaller and more cohesive communities foster stronger identification and mutual influence, making communities central to brand engagement and loyalty formation.

Ultimately, micro-community belonging outperformed traditional social proof across perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source. This is a valuable finding since followers' perceptions related to the influencer community can significantly affect their attitudes and intention toward the influencer's message and purchase recommendations (Farivar & Wang, 2022).

RQ2: *Does the credibility of the source (evaluated by trustworthiness, authenticity and identification with the source) influence Gen Z consumers' perception of adoption risk in the context of emerging cosmetic brands?*

To address this question, we tested four hypotheses (H2a: Perceived trustworthiness of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk, H2b: Perceived authenticity of the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk, H2c: Identification with the source has a negative impact on perceived adoption risk and H2d: The effect of endorser type on

perceived adoption risk is mediated by perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source).

While previous studies identified that perceived trustworthiness, perceived authenticity and identification with the source influence consumers' perceived adoption risk, the outcomes from H2a, H2b and H2c demonstrate that, among these factors, only trustworthiness positions as a significant adoption risk reducer for emerging cosmetic brands. These findings suggest that, while authenticity and identification are important qualities for Gen Z consumers, they are not enough to ease the uncertainty of adoption new cosmetic brands.

Nevertheless, the combined mediation of all source credibility factors in explaining the effect of influencer type on perceived adoption risk was statistically significant (H2d). These outcomes provide relevant insights into which source credibility factors matter most to reduce the uncertainty of Gen Z consumers.

The significant effect of perceived trustworthiness confirms that credibility is a central determinant of risk perception. This is consistent with the Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) since source credibility affects opinion change and further adoption, significantly related to the trustworthiness of the source used in the communication. Furthermore, Friedman & Friedman (1979) indicated that trustworthiness is probably the major dimension underlying source credibility, while Leal et al. (2013) provided strong empirical evidence that trust developed within virtual communities reduces uncertainty, ultimately influencing purchasing decisions. Hence, prior research is supported by the outcomes of our study.

The findings indicate that although perceived authenticity is widely recognized as one of Gen Z's most valued endorser attributes, this feature did not directly reduce perceived adoption risk. This slightly contradicts prior studies that suggested that digital relationship ecosystems that fostered authenticity contributed to reducing perceived risk (Kumar et al., 2016). Meaning that, while the endorsers' perceived authenticity contributes to promote genuine connections and build trust in the digital environment it is not sufficient to overcome the risks associated with adopting emerging brands.

Similarly, the non-significant effect of identification with the source suggests that feeling similar or connected with the endorser does not directly mitigate perceived risk. According to the Social Identity Theory (Farivar & Wang, 2022) followers' identification with the

community has a stronger effect on purchase intention. Sokolova & Perez (2020) further stated that perceived similarity fosters authenticity and emotional closeness which reduces uncertainty when trying new products. However, the findings of this study indicate that this emotional closeness may not be enough to ensure confidence in trying a new brand.

Since the combined mediation of all factors was significant (H2d), this means that, perceived trustworthiness drives the negative effect on adoption risk, while perceived authenticity and identification with the source play indirect supporting roles by enhancing the credibility and connection with the endorser. These findings align with McAlexander et al. (2002) suggesting that since community participation enhances trust and belonging, engagement within micro-communities can mitigate perceived risk and foster loyalty. Therefore, in the context of emerging brands, perceived trustworthiness of the source becomes even more critical since consumers' risk perceptions influence their willingness to trial innovations and adopt products from unfamiliar brands (Mitchell & Boustani, 1993).

To summarize, perceived trustworthiness seems to act as the key psychological factor that helps social influence lower adoption risk. This supports the idea that, in situations with a lot of uncertainty and little brand familiarity, Gen Z consumers focus more on reliability and trust signals than on emotional connection or perceived similarity.

RQ3: *Does micro-community belonging reduce Gen Z consumers' adoption risk more effectively than traditional social proof, in the context of emerging cosmetic brands?*

The results of H3 testing confirmed the superiority of the micro-community belonging when compared to the traditional social proof in reducing Gen Z adoption risk of emerging cosmetic brands. Specifically, the findings indicate that micro-community belonging had a stronger indirect effect on perceived adoption risk through the source credibility factors. This insight suggests that community-based endorsement strategies are more effective than traditional social proof, especially in situations where trust needs to be quickly established, like when adoption emerging cosmetic brands.

This finding demonstrates that Gen Z consumers perceive endorsers involved in smaller and interactive communities as more reliable sources when evaluating emerging cosmetic brands. Therefore, this aligns with the insights from other recent studies that concluded that Generation Z has a preference for genuine validation over mass approval (Haenlein et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2023). De Veirman et al. (2017) indicate that while popularity boosts

visibility, it can simultaneously undermine perceived authenticity, reducing persuasive effectiveness since it evokes perceptions of over-commercialization. Accordingly, Leung et al. (2022), found out that, the audience's awareness of persuasion led to declining trust in traditional social proof.

One of the main explanations to justify the superiority of micro-community belonging lies in the relational nature of smaller communities. Prior research describes micro-communities as digital relationship ecosystems that foster emotional attachment that contributes to mitigate perceived adoption risk (Kumar et al., 2016). Consumers have always shaped trends through communal validation and collective identity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In the digital landscape, consumers are no longer passive recipients of brand messages but active participants who share, comment and influence others' perceptions (Binwani & Ho, 2019).

Ultimately, as suggested by the Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), source credibility affects opinion change and further adoption. In this sense, the findings align with the generational shift toward trustworthy and community-driven interaction. Therefore, micro-communities are more successful in reducing risk perception of Gen Z consumers for their ability to transform consumers into active contributors within an environment of shared value and meaningful mutual influence, which minimizes uncertainty and enables the adoption of emerging brands.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this dissertation was to understand how different types of endorsers (traditional social proof vs. micro-community belonging) shape Gen Z consumers' perceptions of adoption risk when evaluating emerging cosmetic brands. For that, three research questions were raised and responses were obtained through a quantitative experimental study in which variables were measured and hypotheses tested. The research specifically compared the effectiveness of micro-community belonging and traditional social proof while investigating how source credibility factors, like perceived trustworthiness, authenticity and identification mediate this effect.

5.1 Main Findings and Conclusions

Results indicate that micro-community belonging is an effective way to reduce perceived adoption risk among Gen Z consumers. This influence occurs indirectly through source credibility perceptions. Specifically, perceived trustworthiness emerged as the dominant factor, significantly mitigating the uncertainty that comes with adoption new cosmetic brands. In contrast, perceived authenticity and identification with the source, while positively affected by micro-community belonging, did not independently lower adoption risk.

Traditional social proof was not as effective as micro-community belonging in reducing consumers' adoption risk. These findings indicate that Gen Z consumers value trust-based validation found in small, socially cohesive communities more than mass-approval signals like popularity or reach, when assessing unfamiliar brands.

Therefore, social validation methods seem particularly significant when consumers have limited familiarity with the brand and face high adoption risk. This reinforces the idea that micro-community belonging is vital during the early stages of brand exposure.

5.2 Academic Implications

This research extends the Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 1993), by showing that the effectiveness of social validation cues depend on their perceived credibility. According to this theory, when people are uncertain, they rely on others' behavior to decide what's correct. While traditional social proof relies on numerical indicators of popularity, our findings suggest that these cues are less effective in reducing perceived adoption risk for Gen Z consumers. Instead, socially rooted forms of validation, like micro-community belonging, provide a more credible

and trust foundation for decision-making under uncertainty. Thereby, influence has shifted from reliance on mass approval to communal validation.

Furthermore, this study complements the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), by clarifying the relative importance of its key-dimension in high-risk, low-familiarity consumption contexts. Our findings revealed that from all source credibility factors, perceived trustworthiness was the only factor that significantly mitigates adoption risk for emerging cosmetic brands. This refines existing theory by suggesting that emotional and identity-based factors may be less relevant than credibility evaluations when perceived risk is high.

Additionally, our study shows that the value of micro-communities extends beyond emotional attachment or shared identity by incorporating insights from the Brand Community Theory (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and the Social Identity Theory (Farivar & Wang, 2022). These communities foster credible informational environments. Hence, this perspective challenges the assumption that identification alone leads to persuasive outcomes and emphasizes the significance of trust-oriented community dynamics in early brand adoption.

Moreover, the study's findings are inherently related to Perceived Risk Theory (Bauer, 1960) as consumers anticipate potentially negative outcomes from their actions, leading to uncertainty. This is particularly relevant in the cosmetics market since the online environment limits consumers' ability to judge product quality. As such, emerging brands intensify this uncertainty due to their lower reputation and unfamiliarity. By offering trustworthy social reassurance, communal interaction and peer-to-peer clarification, micro-communities are particularly effective in addressing this limitation, making consumers feel safer when considering to adopt unknown brands. Therefore, by focusing on emerging brands, this dissertation addresses a gap in influencer marketing research that has typically focused on established brands.

Finally, by focusing particularly on Gen Z consumers, the study reveals a timely contribution since most research isn't attentive to their unique skepticism and community-driven behaviors. Unlike previous generations, these consumers are developing a new lifestyle and consumer patterns digitally. Therefore, this dissertation provides valuable empirical results for literature regarding this generational shift in endorser preference and perceptions.

5.3 Managerial Implications

Several actionable insights for marketers aiming to maximize their digital marketing effectiveness may be provided by this study's findings. These insights are particularly relevant for emerging cosmetic brands targeting Gen Z consumers and seeking to overcome the inherent high adoption risk of their product category.

First, when launching new brands, marketers should prioritize micro-communities that foster relational depth and trust instead of focusing on mass-reach endorsers. Based on the conclusion of our study, mass approval techniques may be useful to generate higher visibility, yet they are insufficient to reduce perceived risk. Therefore, collaborating with micro or nano-influencers who cultivate close, trusted communities is likely to be more effective in lowering perceived adoption risk than campaigns relying solely on mass approval endorsements.

Furthermore, emerging brands must ensure their selected endorsers are perceived as trustworthy rather than merely relatable or popular. As our study indicates, trustworthiness is probably the major dimension underlying source credibility. This is crucial for cosmetics brands, since consumers demand transparency and trust due to the high-risk nature of the products.

Moreover, mass approval endorsers can also benefit from these results. In order to mitigate Gen Z's skepticism of their overtly commercialized status, it is crucial for these endorsers to develop their sense of community and generate a more trustworthy message.

To conclude, a hybrid investment between traditional social proof and micro-communities is the best strategic approach for emerging cosmetic brands. Investment in trustworthy micro-communities is particularly valuable during the early exposure stages, in order to mitigate adoption risk and generate higher engagement. Over time, brands may diversify their communication tactics as familiarity increases and perceived risk reduces. Then, traditional social proof can still be used tactically for brand exposure, introducing the emerging brand to a broader audience.

5.4 Limitations and Further Research

Despite its valuable contribution to existing literature and marketing management, this study has limitations that should be addressed in future research.

While the results showed that trustworthiness significantly reduced adoption risk, authenticity and identification with the source did not reveal direct effects. This may be partly explained by limitations related to the survey design, sample characteristics or measurement sensitivity. Specifically, subtle nuances may have not been fully captured by quantitative scales alone or the chosen stimuli may not have been strong enough to trigger these cues. Besides, the study relied exclusively on a quantitative approach, which allows for statistical analysis but does not fully captures psychological, emotional and contextual cues that shape how consumers interpret the endorsers' message.

Therefore, future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches, integrating qualitative interviews and content analysis to explore how consumers emotionally process endorsers' cues and community interactions. Moreover, the study's results suggest the need for further exploration of additional mediators. Hence, further research should analyze other source credibility factors such as the level of interaction, expertise and emotional closeness, which have been identified in prior literature as causal factors of risk evaluation.

Furthermore, the questionnaire examined only two specific examples of endorser types: a mass-approval celebrity representing traditional social proof and a micro-influencer illustrating micro-community belonging. While the empirical study used a celebrity to represent traditional social proof, this construct encompasses a broader range of cues, such as user ratings and reviews. Additionally, the omission of other meaningful categories for both stimuli, restrict the depth of understanding how endorser types influence perceived risk. However, due to time constraints and limited resources, it was not feasible to incorporate multiple formats into the survey stimuli.

Moreover, the choice of the stimuli examples may have constrained the mediator (M3) identification with the source. The physical Asiatic characteristics of the endorsers do not reflect the typical appearance of Western European Gen Z audience which may have weakened identification scores.

In this sense, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how influence mechanisms differ in their ability to reduce risk, future studies should compare a broader range of endorsements.

In addition, the sample although diverse, consisted predominantly of Portuguese respondents due to the use of a non-probability convenience sampling method. Furthermore, the chosen

product used in the stimuli was highly specific and targeted mainly to female consumers. Therefore, these factors restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations and may not entirely represent the behaviors of Gen Z consumers across other markets.

Given that, future studies should not only aim for cross-cultural samples but also allow for gender-balanced responses with gender-neutral product categories' choices.

Finally, perceived adoption risk is a multidimensional construct particularly relevant in the cosmetics industry, which includes performance, financial, psychological, time, social and other inherent risks. This study focused primarily on performance and financial risk (Stone & Grønhaug, 1993), which may have limited the ability to capture the full spectrum of uncertainties consumers face when evaluating emerging cosmetic brands. Thus, future research should incorporate additional dimensions of perceived risk to better understand the global risk experience in digital environments.

5.5 Final Remarks

In conclusion, this dissertation shows that micro-community belonging is a powerful and trust-based mechanism for reducing perceived adoption risk among Gen Z consumers, particularly for emerging cosmetic brands. The study provides both theoretical insights and practical advice for navigating today's digital marketing landscape by emphasizing the importance of perceived trustworthiness and the decreasing effectiveness of traditional social proof.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Main Survey

Block 0: Introduction

Dear Participant,

This research is conducted as part of my Master's thesis in Management with a Specialization in Strategic Marketing at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics. 🎓

The purpose of this study is to understand **the impact of social media recommendations on consumers' behavior towards a new product**. All the information you provide will be kept confidential and used exclusively for research purposes.

The questionnaire will take less than 5 minutes to complete and your participation is voluntary and anonymous.
If you have any questions, feel free to contact: s- cdviana@ucp.pt

I appreciate your time and collaboration!

Camila Viana

Block 1: Screening Questions

Q1. Which gender do you identify with?

- Female
- Male
- Other

End survey if "Female" is not selected.

Q2. Were you born between the years 1996 and 2010?

- Yes
- No

End survey if "Yes" is not selected.

Q3. Do you purchase cosmetic products?

- Yes
- No

End survey if "Yes" is not selected.

Q4. Are you an active user of social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, TikTok)?

- Yes
- No

End survey if “Yes” is not selected.

Block 2.1: Stimuli 1 – Traditional Social Proof

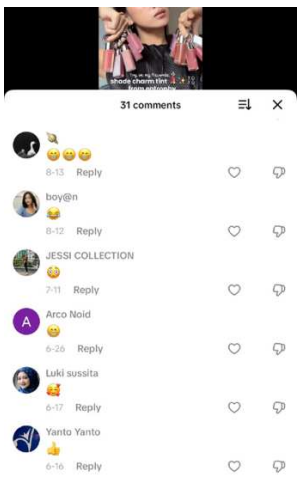
Imagine that, while browsing TikTok, you come across a post by Kezia (@kezializina), a celebrity with 1.1 million followers. This TikTok post shows the creator trying on the lip glosses from the brand Entropy.

Before viewing the post, know more about the content creator:

Kezia regularly posts beauty content on her TikTok account. Her videos often receive a large number of views, likes and comments. The comment sections of her posts usually include reactions from followers.

Imagine that, while browsing TikTok, you come across this post (13sec video):

This is the post's comment section:



Keeping in mind the TikTok post you just saw, please answer the following questions.

Q1. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	5 = Somewhat Agree	6 = Agree	7 = Strongly Agree
One can expect good advice from this creator.							
This creator is genuinely interested in recommending products that would benefit their followers.							
One can believe the statements of this creator.							
I would rely on advice from this creator.							
This creator is genuine.							
This creator seems sincere to me.							
This creator is authentic.							
I find the creator has the same preferences as me.							
I find many common points between the creator and me.							
I find that the creator and I share similar interests.							

Q2. This is an attention question. Please select the option "Somewhat Agree".

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat Disagree
- 4 = Neither Agree or Disagree
- 5 = Somewhat Agree
- 6 = Agree
- 7 = Strongly Agree

End survey if “5 = Somewhat Agree” is not selected.

Take another look at the post from Kezia, specifically the cosmetic brand presented: Entropy.

The following statements are about your familiarity with the cosmetic brand presented in the previous post.

Q3. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	5 = Somewhat Agree	6 = Agree	7 = Strongly Agree
I am familiar with this cosmetic brand.							
I am experienced with this cosmetic brand.							
I am knowledgeable about this cosmetic brand.							

As we are approaching the end of this survey, please keep in mind the TikTok post you viewed, including its content, comments and interactions to answer the following statements.

Q4. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	5 = Somewhat Agree	6 = Agree	7 = Strongly Agree
If I bought this cosmetic brand, I think I would be held in lower esteem by the people around me.							
My purchase of this cosmetic brand would cause me to be thought of as being foolish by some people whose opinion I value.							
My purchasing this cosmetic brand							

would be a risky way to spend my money.							
If I bought this cosmetic brand, I would be concerned whether the product is really worth my money.							
My purchase of this cosmetic brand leads to concerns about whether the product could provoke some physical side-effects such as skin irritation/allergic reaction.							
As I consider the purchase of this cosmetic brand, I worry about whether the product will really perform as well as it is supposed to.							

Block 2.2: Stimuli 2 – Micro-community Belonging

Imagine that, while browsing TikTok, you come across a post by Gina (@ginaseooo), a creator with 37k followers. This TikTok post shows the creator trying on the lip glosses from the brand Entropy.

Before viewing the post, know more about the content creator:

Gina regularly posts beauty content on her TikTok account. Her videos often receive a modest number of views, likes and comments. The comment sections of her posts usually include interactions among her and the followers.

Imagine that, while browsing TikTok, you come across this post:

This is the post's comment section:

Keeping in mind the TikTok post you just saw, please answer the following questions.

Q1. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	5 = Somewhat Agree	6 = Agree	7 = Strongly Agree
One can expect good advice from this creator.							
This creator is genuinely interested in recommending products that would benefit their followers.							
One can believe the statements of this creator.							
I would rely on advice from this creator.							
This creator is genuine.							
This creator seems sincere to me.							
This creator is authentic.							
I find the creator has the same preferences as me.							
I find many common points between the creator and me.							
I find that the creator and I share similar interests.							

Q2. This is an attention question. Please select the option "Somewhat Agree".

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat Disagree
- 4 = Neither Agree or Disagree
- 5 = Somewhat Agree
- 6 = Agree
- 7 = Strongly Agree

End survey if "5 = Somewhat Agree" is not selected.

Take another look at the post from Gina, specifically the cosmetic brand presented: Entropy.

The following statements are about your familiarity with the cosmetic brand presented in the previous post.

Q3. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	5 = Somewhat Agree	6 = Agree	7 = Strongly Agree
I am familiar with this cosmetic brand.							
I am experienced with this cosmetic brand.							
I am knowledgeable about this cosmetic brand.							

As we are approaching the end of this survey, please keep in mind the TikTok post you viewed, including its content, comments and interactions to answer the following statements.

Q4. Please indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree.

	1 = Strongly Disagree	2 = Disagree	3 = Somewhat Disagree	4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	5 = Somewhat Agree	6 = Agree	7 = Strongly Agree
If I bought this cosmetic brand, I think I would be held in lower esteem by the people around me.							
My purchase of this cosmetic brand would cause me to be thought of as being foolish by some people whose opinion I value.							
My purchasing this cosmetic brand would be a risky way to spend my money.							
If I bought this cosmetic brand, I would be concerned whether the product is really worth my money.							
My purchase of this cosmetic brand leads to concerns about whether the product could provoke some physical side-effects such as skin irritation/allergic reaction.							
As I consider the purchase of this cosmetic brand, I worry about whether the product will really perform as well as it is supposed to.							

Block 3: Demographic Questions

To conclude this survey, these are a few final demographic questions that will be treated with confidentiality and used only for research purposes.

Q1. Do you consider yourself someone who likes to try products from emerging cosmetic brands?

- o Yes, I often try new or emerging brands
- o Sometimes, if the brand seems trustworthy or recommended
- o Rarely, I usually stick to well-known brands
- o Never, I prefer established brands only

Q2. What would most influence your interest in trying products from emerging cosmetic brands? (Select the option that best represent your experience)

- Recommendations or content from well-known influencers or celebrities
- Recommendations or content from small or niche creators
- Suggestions or discussions within online communities or friend groups
- Online ads or brand posts on social media
- Reviews or opinions I read or watched online
- If other, please specify:

Q3. What is your age?

- 15 - 18
- 19 - 22
- 23 - 26
- 26 - 29

Q4. Which country are you from?

- Select from the box

Q5. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

- School
- Highschool graduate
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- PhD
- Other

Appendix 2 - Distribution between groups

Stimulus_Type

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Micro Community Belonging	120	50.8	50.8	50.8
	Traditional Social Proof	116	49.2	49.2	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

Appendix 3 - Scales Reliability

Perceived Trustworthiness

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.864	4

Perceived Authenticity

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.925	3

Identification with the source

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.877	3

Adoption Risk

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.772	6

Appendix 4 - Normality Diagnosis

4.1 Skewness & Kurtosis

Descriptives

			Statistic	Std. Error
MTM	Mean		4.0975	.07244
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3.9547	
		Upper Bound	4.2402	
	5% Trimmed Mean		4.1085	
	Median		4.1250	
	Variance		1.238	
	Std. Deviation		1.11280	
	Minimum		1.00	
	Maximum		7.00	
	Range		6.00	
	Interquartile Range		1.25	
	Skewness		-.160	.158
	Kurtosis		.123	.316
MAM	Mean		4.0452	.07966
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3.8883	
		Upper Bound	4.2021	
	5% Trimmed Mean		4.0628	
	Median		4.0000	
	Variance		1.498	
	Std. Deviation		1.22381	
	Minimum		1.00	
	Maximum		7.00	
	Range		6.00	
	Interquartile Range		1.67	
	Skewness		-.124	.158
	Kurtosis		-.265	.316

MISM	Mean		3.7232	.08475
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3.5562	
		Upper Bound	3.8901	
	5% Trimmed Mean		3.7263	
	Median		4.0000	
	Variance		1.695	
	Std. Deviation		1.30198	
	Minimum		1.00	
	Maximum		7.00	
	Range		6.00	
	Interquartile Range		2.00	
	Skewness		-.107	.158
	Kurtosis		-.747	.316
DVAR	Mean		3.7218	.06493
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	3.5938	
		Upper Bound	3.8497	
	5% Trimmed Mean		3.7379	
	Median		3.8333	
	Variance		.995	
	Std. Deviation		.99753	
	Minimum		1.00	
	Maximum		6.17	
	Range		5.17	
	Interquartile Range		1.29	
	Skewness		-.233	.158
	Kurtosis		-.014	.316

4.2 Kolmogorov-Smirnov & Shapiro-Wilk

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
MTM	.075	236	.002	.991	236	.168
MAM	.108	236	<.001	.979	236	.001
MISM	.131	236	<.001	.967	236	<.001
DVAR	.061	236	.031	.991	236	.126

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Appendix 5 - Levene's Test

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
						Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
MISM	Equal variances assumed	4.227	.041	-4.838	234	<.001	<.001	-.78362	.16198	-1.10275	-.46449
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.831	231.169	<.001	<.001	-.78362	.16219	-1.10319	-.46405
MTM	Equal variances assumed	2.177	.141	-7.045	234	<.001	<.001	-.92917	.13189	-1.18901	-.66932
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.026	225.929	<.001	<.001	-.92917	.13224	-1.18975	-.66859
MAM	Equal variances assumed	.804	.371	-6.947	234	<.001	<.001	-1.01006	.14540	-1.29652	-.72360
	Equal variances not assumed			-6.936	230.332	<.001	<.001	-1.01006	.14563	-1.29699	-.72312
DVAR	Equal variances assumed	2.026	.156	1.630	234	.052	.104	.21097	.12943	-.04403	.46596
	Equal variances not assumed			1.626	228.128	.053	.105	.21097	.12971	-.04461	.46655

Appendix 6 - Collinearity

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics Tolerance	Collinearity Statistics VIF
1	(Constant)	4.783	.244		19.564	<.001		
	MTM	-.295	.094	-.329	-3.150	.002	.356	2.808
	MAM	-.031	.085	-.038	-.362	.718	.356	2.809
	MISM	.074	.062	.096	1.184	.238	.593	1.687

a. Dependent Variable: DVAR

Appendix 7 - Brand Familiarity

BrandFamiliarity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	155	65.7	65.7	65.7
	1.33	13	5.5	5.5	71.2
	1.67	4	1.7	1.7	72.9
	2.00	39	16.5	16.5	89.4
	2.33	2	.8	.8	90.3
	2.67	7	3.0	3.0	93.2
	3.00	4	1.7	1.7	94.9
	3.33	2	.8	.8	95.8
	4.00	3	1.3	1.3	97.0
	4.33	2	.8	.8	97.9
	5.00	4	1.7	1.7	99.6
	5.33	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

Appendix 8 - Sample Characterization

What is your age?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	15 - 18	9	3.8	3.8	3.8
	19 - 22	148	62.7	62.7	66.5
	23 - 26	70	29.7	29.7	96.2
	26 - 29	9	3.8	3.8	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

List of Countries

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Portugal	209	88.6	88.6	88.6
	Austria	3	1.3	1.3	89.8
	Canada	2	.8	.8	90.7
	Germany	12	5.1	5.1	95.8
	Italy	1	.4	.4	96.2
	Mexico	4	1.7	1.7	97.9
	Spain	1	.4	.4	98.3
	Tunisia	1	.4	.4	98.7
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	2	.8	.8	99.6
	United States of America	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Highschool graduate	53	22.5	22.5	22.5
	Bachelor's Degree	144	61.0	61.0	83.5
	Master's Degree	38	16.1	16.1	99.6
	Other	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

What is your current occupation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Student	118	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Student-worker	44	18.6	18.6	68.6
	Employed	64	27.1	27.1	95.8
	Unemployed	7	3.0	3.0	98.7
	Other	3	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

Do you consider yourself someone who likes to try products from emerging cosmetic brands?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes, I often try new or emerging brands	39	16.5	16.5	16.5
	Sometimes, if the brand seems trustworthy or recommended	113	47.9	47.9	64.4
	Rarely, I usually stick to well-known brands	77	32.6	32.6	97.0
	Never, I prefer established brands only	7	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	236	100.0	100.0	

$Influence_EmergingBrands Frequencies

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Influence_EmergingBrands[a]	Recommendations or content from well-known influencers or celebrities	112	22.1%	47.5%
	Recommendations or content from small or niche creators	98	19.4%	41.5%
	Suggestions or discussions within online communities or friend groups	139	27.5%	58.9%
	Online ads or brand posts on social media	29	5.7%	12.3%
	Reviews or opinions I read or watched online	118	23.3%	50.0%
	If other, please specify:	10	2.0%	4.2%
Total		506	100.0%	214.4%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Appendix 9 - SPSS Output: Independent Samples T-Test H1a

Group Statistics

	Stimulus_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MTM	Micro Community Belonging	120	4.5542	.93214	.08509
	Traditional Social Proof	116	3.6250	1.09022	.10122

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
						Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
MTM	Equal variances assumed	2.177	.141	7.045	234	<.001	<.001	.92917	.13189	.66932	1.18901
	Equal variances not assumed			7.026	225.929	<.001	<.001	.92917	.13224	.66859	1.18975

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper
MTM	Cohen's d	1.01292	.917	.648	1.185
	Hedges' correction	1.01618	.914	.646	1.181
	Glass's delta	1.09022	.852	.573	1.129

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Appendix 10 - SPSS Output: Independent Samples T-Test H1b

Group Statistics

	Stimulus_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MAM	Micro Community Belonging	120	4.5417	1.06472	.09720
	Traditional Social Proof	116	3.5316	1.16799	.10845

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
						Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
MAM	Equal variances assumed	.804	.371	6.947	234	<.001	<.001	1.01006	.14540	.72360	1.29652
	Equal variances not assumed			6.936	230.332	<.001	<.001	1.01006	.14563	.72312	1.29699

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper
MAM	Cohen's d	1.11667	.905	.636	1.172
	Hedges' correction	1.12027	.902	.634	1.168
	Glass's delta	1.16799	.865	.585	1.142

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Appendix 11 - SPSS Output: Independent Samples T-Test H1c

Group Statistics

	Stimulus_Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MISM	Micro Community Belonging	120	4.1083	1.19614	.10919
	Traditional Social Proof	116	3.3247	1.29171	.11993

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
						Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
MISM	Equal variances assumed	4.227	.041	4.838	234	<.001	<.001	.78362	.16198	.46449	1.10275
	Equal variances not assumed			4.831	231.169	<.001	<.001	.78362	.16219	.46405	1.10319

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper
MISM	Cohen's d	1.24403	.630	.368	.891
	Hedges' correction	1.24803	.628	.367	.888
	Glass's delta	1.29171	.607	.338	.872

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

Appendix 12 - SPSS Output: Multiple Linear Regression

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
DVAR	3.7218	.99753	236
MTM	4.0975	1.11280	236
MAM	4.0452	1.22381	236
MISM	3.7232	1.30198	236

Correlations

		DVAR	MTM	MAM	MISM
Pearson Correlation	DVAR	1.000	-.301	-.239	-.125
	MTM	-.301	1.000	.786	.603
	MAM	-.239	.786	1.000	.603
	MISM	-.125	.603	.603	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	DVAR	.	<.001	<.001	.027
	MTM	.000	.	.000	.000
	MAM	.000	.000	.	.000
	MISM	.027	.000	.000	.
N	DVAR	236	236	236	236
	MTM	236	236	236	236
	MAM	236	236	236	236
	MISM	236	236	236	236

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.310[a]	.096	.085	.95441

a. Predictors: (Constant), MISM, MTM, MAM

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	22.510	3	7.503	8.237	<.001[b]
	Residual	211.330	232	.911		
	Total	233.839	235			

a. Dependent Variable: DVAR

b. Predictors: (Constant), MISM, MTM, MAM

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.783	.244		19.564	<.001
	MTM	-.295	.094	-.329	-3.150	.002
	MAM	-.031	.085	-.038	-.362	.718
	MISM	.074	.062	.096	1.184	.238

a. Dependent Variable: DVAR

Appendix 13 - SPSS Output: Model 4 of Hayes Process Macro

```
  Model: 4
      Y: DVAR
      X: SType
     M1: MISM
     M2: MTM
     M3: MAM

Sample
Size:  236

**************************************************************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 MISM

Model Summary
          R       R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .3015      .0909     1.5476    23.4035     1.0000   234.0000      .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant    4.1083      .1136    36.1765      .0000     3.8846     4.3321
SType       -.7836      .1620    -4.8377      .0000    -1.1027     -.4645

**************************************************************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 MTM

Model Summary
          R       R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .4183      .1750     1.0260    49.6323     1.0000   234.0000      .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant    4.5542      .0925    49.2521      .0000     4.3720     4.7363
SType       -.9292      .1319    -7.0450      .0000    -1.1890     -.6693
```

```
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 MAM

Model Summary
          R       R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .4135      .1710     1.2470    48.2580     1.0000   234.0000      .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant     4.5417      .1019    44.5534      .0000     4.3408     4.7425
SType       -1.0101      .1454    -6.9468      .0000    -1.2965     -.7236

**************************************************************************

OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 DVAR

Model Summary
          R       R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .3109      .0967      .9144     6.1815     4.0000   231.0000      .0001

Model
             coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant     4.8432      .3056    15.8466      .0000     4.2410     5.4454
SType        -.0459      .1387     -.3307      .7412     -.3192      .2275
MISM          .0729      .0623     1.1716      .2426     -.0497      .1956
MTM          -.3001      .0950    -3.1575      .0018     -.4874     -.1128
MAM          -.0348      .0863     -.4034      .6870     -.2047      .1352


****************** DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y ******************

Direct effect of X on Y
     Effect         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
     -.0459      .1387     -.3307      .7412     -.3192      .2275

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:
          Effect     BootSE   BootLLCI   BootULCI
TOTAL      .2568      .0780      .1122      .4205
MISM      -.0572      .0501     -.1672      .0331
MTM        .2789      .1004      .0971      .4890
MAM        .0351      .0858     -.1259      .2160
```