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Effects of Opinion Leadership and Taste Leadership on Intention to Follow Recommendations: A Multi-Group Analysis across Sectors

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Abstract

This study examines the factors that influence opinion leadership and taste leadership among social media influencers (SMIs) and their effects on followers' intention to follow recommendations. It also investigates whether the effects of these two leadership roles differ across sectoral contexts. Fashion, travel, and food are considered sectors where hedonic and experiential consumption characteristics are more prominent, whereas technology and automotive are considered sectors where utilitarian evaluation and product-related knowledge are more prominent. Data were collected through an online survey conducted in Türkiye between March and May 2024. The final sample included 1,580 participants from five sectors. The research model and hypotheses were tested using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), while sectoral differences were examined using multi-group analysis (PLS-MGA). The results show that attractiveness, prestige, trustworthiness, and expertise positively affect taste leadership. Trustworthiness, expertise, information quality, and homophily positively affect opinion leadership. Both taste leadership and opinion leadership have positive effects on followers' intention to follow recommendations. The sectoral comparisons show that the effect of taste leadership is stronger in hedonic / experiential contexts, while the effect of opinion leadership tends to be stronger in utilitarian/information-intensive contexts. These findings show that the relative importance of SMI leadership roles may differ depending on the consumption context.

Keywords: Social media influencer, taste leadership, opinion leadership, intention to follow recommendations, perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise.

1. Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs) play an important role in today's digital consumption environment, particularly in the way consumers obtain information, evaluate alternatives, and make consumption choices. Their role, however, is not limited to sharing information

with their followers. The Two-Step Flow Model suggests that information is interpreted by influential individuals before reaching others (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This perspective is also relevant to SMIs, who interpret the information they receive and present it to followers from their own point of view. Through this process, they may influence how followers perceive and evaluate products, brands, and consumption alternatives. In digital environments, this influence can take different forms, and SMIs may function as both opinion leaders and taste leaders (Merz & Von Sikorski, 2025; Olfat et al., 2024). While opinion leadership is mainly associated with knowledge, expertise, and trustworthiness, taste leadership concerns the ability to influence the aesthetic preferences, styles, and consumption choices of others.

SMIs with large followings have also become important social reference figures. They can influence how consumers evaluate brands and products (Oueslati et al., 2021). Instagram is particularly important in this respect because visual content and identity presentation are prominent on the platform. It allows SMIs to reach specific target audiences and influence consumer perceptions (Khamis et al., 2017). Therefore, the influence of SMIs is not limited to their ability to share information. The type of leadership that followers attribute to them is also important.

Understanding these different leadership roles is important because consumer decisions are not based only on rational and functional evaluations. Pleasure, identity, self-expression, aesthetics, and emotions can also play a role in consumer decisions. SMIs can therefore influence their followers in two main ways. They can provide high-quality information and expertise. They can also serve as reference figures for aesthetic preferences, lifestyles, and consumption choices. In this respect, opinion leadership and taste leadership represent two different but complementary mechanisms of SMI influence. Therefore, it is important to understand how these two forms of leadership develop and how they affect followers' intention to follow recommendations.

Despite its importance, there are several research gaps in the influencer marketing literature. Empirical studies on the factors shaping perceived taste leadership are still relatively limited (Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022; Martensen et al., 2018). Existing studies have mostly treated SMIs as opinion leaders. These studies have focused more on information sharing, expertise, and knowledge-based influence (Casaló et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019). However, social media users may also view SMIs as reference figures in terms of aesthetic preferences, standards of taste, lifestyles, and consumption choices. Taste leadership refers to this form of influence. Despite this, the antecedents of taste leadership have received relatively limited attention in empirical studies (Jeyhan & Pangaribuan, 2023; Ki & Kim, 2019).

A similar research gap exists regarding the behavioral consequences of SMI leadership. Previous studies have shown that perceived opinion leadership can influence consumer trust, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, and conformity behavior (Akdevelioglu & Kara, 2020; Chai et al., 2023; Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022; Tabar et al.,

2025). In contrast, studies directly examining the behavioral consequences of taste leadership are more limited (Jeyhan & Pangaribuan, 2023; Ki & Kim, 2019). Furthermore, most existing studies have examined the SMI effect through a single leadership dimension. Some studies have focused only on a limited number of antecedents of leadership perceptions (Chen et al., 2023; Fitriati et al., 2023; Jeyhan & Pangaribuan, 2023). Therefore, there is a need for an integrated and leadership-based framework that simultaneously explains how both taste and opinion leadership develop and how they influence behavioral intentions.

Another research gap concerns the importance of these leadership roles in different contexts. Existing studies have mostly examined the SMI effect within a single sectoral context (Chen et al., 2023; Fitriati et al., 2023). Therefore, it is not yet sufficiently clear whether the relative effects of opinion and taste leadership change in different consumption contexts. Hedonic and utilitarian consumption are not mutually exclusive categories, and the same consumption context can carry both characteristics at different levels (Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). The same product can also be evaluated in both functional and pleasure-oriented ways in different situations (Alba & Williams, 2013), and the hedonic or utilitarian nature of consumption cannot be determined simply by whether the purchase involves a tangible product or an experience (Kousi et al., 2023). Consumption contexts can therefore be viewed along a continuum from hedonic/experiential to utilitarian/information-intensive characteristics. Taste-based influence may be more important in contexts where aesthetics, pleasure, and subjective preferences are more prominent. In contrast, opinion-based influence may be more important where functional attributes, product knowledge, and information-based evaluation are more prominent. This distinction provides a theoretical basis for examining whether the roles of taste and opinion leadership differ across consumption contexts.

Against this background, the present study examines the antecedents of SMI taste and opinion leadership in the fashion, travel, technology, food, and automotive sectors. It also examines how these two forms of leadership affect followers' intention to follow recommendations. Specifically, the study investigates how attractiveness, prestige, trustworthiness, expertise, information quality, interaction, and homophily contribute to the development of these two forms of leadership. It also examines whether the effects of taste and opinion leadership on intention to follow recommendations differ between hedonic/experiential and utilitarian/information-intensive sectoral contexts. In this way, the study provides an integrated, leadership-based explanation of SMI influence by examining the antecedents and behavioral outcomes of taste and opinion leadership within the same framework. It also considers sectoral consumption characteristics to show how SMI influence may depend on the consumption context. From a managerial perspective, the findings may help firms select SMIs who better match the consumption characteristics of their sectors and develop more effective influencer marketing strategies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Opinion and Taste Leadership

With the proliferation of social media in digital marketing, businesses are increasingly turning to electronic word of mouth (eWOM) strategies and social media influencers (SMIs) to strengthen their brands. SMIs are individuals with a following on social media who transform their online visibility into economic value through collaborations with brands (Fitriati et al., 2023). By sharing their experiences about products, services and lifestyles, they interact with their followers and contribute to the formation of new consumption trends (Dinh & Lee, 2024). Unlike traditional celebrities, their organic recognition in the social media environment and their ability to establish closer relationships with their followers increase their influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Schouten et al., 2020).

In the social influence literature, this influence is mostly explained through the concepts of opinion leadership and taste leadership. Opinion leadership is defined as the ability to influence others' evaluation and decision processes through valuable information and recommendations (Casaló et al., 2020; Leal et al., 2014; Suuronen et al., 2022). Consumers follow opinion leaders to reduce uncertainty, keep up with trends, and make more informed decisions (Ki & Kim, 2019). Therefore, opinion leadership is based on knowledge transfer, expertise and cognitive persuasion. However, the transformation of digital communication into a more visual structure shows that social influence cannot be explained only by information-based mechanisms (Li & Xie, 2020). At this point, taste leadership comes to the fore. The interactive structure enabled by Web 2.0 technologies has enabled ordinary users to reach large audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This situation, referred to as the ‘megaphone effect’, makes individuals' aesthetic preferences, lifestyles and consumption practices visible (McFarlane et al., 2022). According to Ki and Kim (2019), taste leadership is the ability to actively share attractive products, styles and new trends. In this context, taste leadership refers to the process of influencing others through aesthetically appealing content and unique styles.

Social Identity Theory provides a theoretical basis for explaining this form of influence. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals define themselves partly through their identification with socially meaningful groups and reference figures (Tajfel, 1974). In social media environments, SMIs can function as reference figures by representing desirable lifestyles, identities and consumption styles. Followers who identify with or aspire to resemble an SMI may therefore use the influencer’s aesthetic preferences, styles and consumption choices as reference points for constructing and expressing their own identities. From this perspective, taste leadership can emerge through identification with the lifestyle and aesthetic standards represented by the influencer and the symbolic meanings attributed to them. Therefore, Social Identity Theory can help explain why followers perceive SMIs as taste leaders and adopt their aesthetic preferences and consumption patterns.

Unlike opinion leadership, which is generally associated with information, expertise, and knowledge transfer, taste leadership is more closely connected with visual appeal, symbolic meaning, and aspirational identification. Its influence, however, goes beyond aesthetic preferences and may also involve prestige and social differentiation (Gupta et al., 2020). For this reason, followers may regard taste leaders as style icons and take their lifestyles as a reference for their own preferences. Such behavior can also be understood through social comparison, as followers compare themselves with influential figures they admire or aspire to resemble (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). The way content is presented is also relevant. Creative and original content tends to generate greater engagement, suggesting that taste leadership involves the ability to develop and communicate a distinctive style rather than simply producing visually attractive content (Kusumasondjaja, 2019).

Although opinion leadership and taste leadership rely on different sources of influence, they can coexist in digital environments. Opinion leadership draws largely on expertise, trustworthiness, and knowledge, whereas taste leadership is associated more with aesthetic appeal, symbolic value, and identification. An SMI may therefore provide useful information about products while also becoming a reference point for followers in terms of style, preferences, and lifestyle. Considering both leadership roles provides a broader view of how SMIs influence their followers in influencer marketing.

2.2 Sectoral Context: The Hedonic / Experiential–Utilitarian / Information-Intensive Continuum

The relative importance of taste and opinion leadership may differ across consumption contexts. However, hedonic and utilitarian consumption are not completely separate. The same consumption context can include both characteristics to different degrees (Batra & Ahtola, 1991). A product or experience may be more hedonic or more utilitarian depending on which characteristics are more important (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). The same product can also be evaluated in terms of both functional benefits and pleasure, depending on the situation (Alba & Williams, 2013). Similarly, the hedonic or utilitarian nature of consumption cannot be determined simply by whether the purchase involves a tangible product or an experience (Kousi et al., 2023). Therefore, consumption contexts can be better viewed along a continuum that reflects the relative importance of hedonic/experiential and utilitarian/information-intensive characteristics. Based on this approach, the five sectors examined in this study are organized into two comparative groups. This grouping does not assume that fashion, travel, and food are purely hedonic or that technology and automotive are purely utilitarian. Instead, the grouping is an analytical distinction based on which characteristics are relatively more prominent in consumer evaluations.

Fashion, travel, and food are positioned relatively closer to the hedonic/experiential side of the continuum. Fashion consumption includes functional benefits but also involves pleasure, symbolic value, aesthetics, and self-expression (Emmanuel-Stephen &

Gbadamosi, 2022). Travel and tourism experiences are also closely related to pleasure, enjoyment, escape from daily life, and the hedonic value of destination experiences (Ponsignon et al., 2021). Similarly, dining experiences can provide pleasure, enjoyment, sensory stimulation, and other experiential benefits beyond satisfying basic nutritional needs. Hedonic and utilitarian benefits can exist together within the same consumption context (Kousi et al., 2023). Hedonic and experiential criteria are expected to be relatively more prominent in these three sectors.

In contrast, technology and automotive are positioned relatively closer to the utilitarian/information-intensive side of the continuum. Consumers often evaluate technology products in terms of usefulness, functionality, efficiency, performance, and practical benefits (Şahin & Söylemez, 2022). Automotive evaluations also involve functional benefits such as mobility and convenience, as well as performance, technical features, and product information. Technology products can provide both hedonic and utilitarian value. Similarly, automobiles can offer driving pleasure, aesthetics, status, and symbolic value (Yavorsky et al., 2021). The positioning of these sectors closer to the utilitarian/information-intensive side stems from the relatively greater importance of functional and knowledge-based evaluation criteria. Thus, the fashion–travel–food and technology–automotive distinctions used in this study should not be seen as a definitive sector classification. Instead, this distinction provides a theoretical and analytical basis for comparing differences between sectors. The continuum approach acknowledges that each consumption context can possess both hedonic/experiential and utilitarian/information-intensive characteristics, while the relative importance of these characteristics may vary depending on the sector.

3. Development of Research Hypotheses

3.1 Perceived Attractiveness and Taste Leadership

Perceived attractiveness refers to the extent to which consumers like and find the content shared by a SMI visually and aesthetically appealing (Ki & Kim, 2019). The transformation of digital communication into an increasingly visual-centred structure has made the aesthetic quality of content design one of the main determinants of social influence processes. In social media environments, elements such as the vividness of posts, the use of animation and visual effects, color harmony and overall design quality are considered the main components of content attractiveness (Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011). Empirical studies in the literature show that aesthetically strong and high-quality visuals significantly increase user interaction (Gupta et al., 2020; Li & Xie, 2020).

Perceived attractiveness not only increases engagement with content but also emerges as a determining factor in the formation of leadership roles attributed to SMIs. Aesthetically attractive content contributes to followers' perception of SMIs as more stylish, trend-setting and exemplary. Indeed, Ki and Kim (2019) and Pérez-Cabañero et al. (2023) empirically found that perceived attractiveness positively and significantly influences perceptions of taste leadership. In addition, Nadanyiova et al. (2020) and Fakhreddin (2025) argue that

aesthetically strong content strengthens SMIs' perception of leadership. In this context, hypothesis H1 was developed:

- H1: Perceived attractiveness positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI taste leadership.

3.2 Perceived Prestige and Taste Leadership

Perceived prestige refers to followers' perception of SMIs as individuals with high status, who offer an elite lifestyle and share luxury content (Ki & Kim, 2019). In the digital environment, prestige is not limited to material wealth; it is also associated with symbolic status, indicators of differentiation and signs of social superiority (Ouvrein et al., 2021). In the context of SMI, prestige reflects an influencer's symbolic value and social position. This symbolic value influences how followers admire and evaluate the SMI (Aleti et al., 2019). Therefore, prestige is considered not only a status indicator but also a symbolic element that individuals draw on in identity construction.

In terms of taste leadership, the perception of prestige makes an SMI's preferences more desirable and exemplary in the eyes of followers. SMIs who are perceived as attractive and prestigious are seen as stronger taste leaders by followers (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). Similarly, various studies show that perceived prestige positively and significantly affects taste leadership (Jeyhan & Pangaribuan, 2023; Pérez-Cabañero et al., 2023). In line with these findings, hypothesis H2 was developed:

- H2: Perceived prestige positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI taste leadership.

3.3 Perceptions of Trustworthiness and Leadership

Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which a source is perceived as honest, consistent and reliable (AlFarraj et al., 2021). In the context of social media, trustworthiness is associated with followers' perception of SMI as a sincere, honest and reliable source of information. This perception of trust contributes to a stronger and more sustainable relationship between the follower and SMI (Ceyhan et al., 2018).

According to the Source Credibility Theory, sources perceived as reliable have higher persuasive power. Current approaches treat trustworthiness as a perceptual structure based on individuals' honesty and expertise evaluations, and show that trustworthy sources elicit more positive reactions from consumers. In this context, it has been determined that sources that communicate impartially and sincerely create a stronger persuasion effect, and the perception of SMIs as reliable increases consumers' purchasing tendencies (Weismueller et al., 2020).

Perceptions of trustworthiness are among the main determinants of the effects of SMIs on leadership types. Since opinion leadership is based on knowledge-based influence, trustworthiness is considered a key component of this leadership type (Munnukka et al.,

2019). However, trustworthiness supports not only knowledge-based leadership but also taste leadership because followers tend to take into account the style preferences and suggestions of SMIs they trust more. As a matter of fact, Chen et al. (2023) found that trustworthiness increases consumers' willingness to follow SMI opinions and social influence capacity, and also has a positive and significant effect on both opinion leadership and taste leadership perceptions.

In line with this theoretical and empirical framework, hypotheses H3 and H5 were developed:

- H3: Perceived trustworthiness positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI taste leadership.
- H5: Perceived trustworthiness positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI opinion leadership.

3.4 Perceptions of Expertise and Leadership

According to psychological motivation theory, the need for information and competence underlies individuals' behaviors of interacting and evaluating content on social media (Aw et al., 2023). For this reason, users turn to content producers that they perceive as competent in their field. Within the framework of Source Credibility Theory, expertise is considered one of the basic dimensions of credibility and plays an important role in perceptions of SMIs as reliable sources of information (Daneshvary & Schwer, 2000). In this context, expertise is defined as a basic source characteristic that expresses the perception that SMIs have knowledge and experience in a specific field (Van Der Waldt et al., 2011).

SMIs that provide detailed information about the production process, technical features, and product usage patterns are perceived as more professional and reliable sources of information by followers (Farivar et al., 2021). This contributes to followers becoming more open to SMI recommendations (Leite et al., 2024; S. Wang et al., 2022). Studies in the literature show that perceived expertise positively and significantly affects opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2023; Leite et al., 2024). Moreover, Vrontis et al. (2021) state that expertise strengthens opinion leadership through mechanisms such as perceived knowledge usefulness and innovativeness. However, expertise supports not only opinion leadership but also taste leadership. This is because followers may perceive SMIs who are competent in style, trends, and product preferences as stronger taste leaders. In fact, Ki and Kim (2019) found that expertise positively affects perceptions of taste leadership. Accordingly, hypotheses H4 and H6 were developed:

- H4: Perceived expertise positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI taste leadership.
- H6: Perceived expertise positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI opinion leadership.

3.5 Perceived Information Quality and Opinion Leadership

According to the Information Adoption Model (IAM), individuals first evaluate the information they encounter in terms of usefulness and quality, and then decide to accept or reject the suggestions in line with this evaluation (Hussain et al., 2018). In this process, perceived information quality is seen as one of the main determinants of information adoption. Individuals are more likely to adopt information that they find valuable, explanatory and useful for themselves (Zhuang et al., 2023). The information evaluation process takes place through two different processing paths, central and peripheral (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). While information quality, content details and descriptive content are evaluated through central processing, clues about the sender such as source reliability are evaluated through peripheral processing (Wang et al., 2024).

In this context, individuals who provide useful, detailed and high-quality information to followers are perceived as more knowledgeable and competent, which increases their social influence capacity. Indeed, it is stated in the literature that opinion leaders are perceived as more knowledgeable and experienced about products compared to other individuals (Shoham & Ruvio, 2008). Moreover, studies show that the level of knowledge and expertise in a particular category are among the main determinants of opinion leadership (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013; Tabar et al., 2025). These findings reveal that as the capacity to provide high-quality information increases, an individual's social influence and perceived leadership capacity also strengthens. Therefore, information quality plays an important role in the formation of opinion leadership perception by contributing to individuals' ability to influence the evaluation and decision processes of others. In this direction, hypothesis H7 was developed:

- H7: Perceived information quality positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI opinion leadership.

3.6 Perceived Homophily and Opinion Leadership

Perceived homophily refers to the perception that individuals are similar to the people they communicate with in terms of values, beliefs, lifestyle, and social status (Hobman et al., 2004). This perceived similarity between the source and the receiver facilitates communication and increases the persuasiveness of the message (Shoenberger & Kim, 2023). In addition, perceived similarity strengthens perceptions of reliability and persuasiveness by reducing uncertainty in digital environments (Sharma & Khandeparkar, 2025). Therefore, followers show greater interest in the content of SMIs they perceive as similar to themselves and are more willing to rely on their opinions.

Studies revealing a positive relationship between homophily and parasocial interaction also show that perceived similarity indirectly increases the social influence of SMIs (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). The strengthening of parasocial ties leads followers to pay closer attention to the suggestions and opinions of SMIs, thereby reinforcing

perceptions of opinion leadership. Therefore, perceived homophily is expected to have a positive and significant effect on opinion leadership. In this context, hypothesis H8 was developed:

- H8: Perceived homophily positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI opinion leadership.

3.7 Interaction and Opinion Leadership

Social media interaction refers to the bidirectional, continuous communication between SMI and its followers via social media platforms. Tools such as comments, likes, shares and direct messaging are the main components of this process (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). This human-centred interaction structure contributes to the strengthening of social ties and trust relationships (Jun & Yi, 2020). The literature indicates that intense interaction and higher user interaction frequency strengthen the perceived leadership role of SMIs (Aw et al., 2023; Chai et al., 2023). Similarly, it is reported that SMIs with high levels of interaction are perceived by their followers as stronger leaders (Ki & Kim, 2019). This is because opinion leadership is based on an individual's capacity to influence others' attitudes and behaviors. As the level of interaction increases, the SMI's visibility, accessibility, and perception of closeness with followers also increase, facilitating their evaluation as more reliable sources of information. Therefore, social media interaction plays an important role in shaping opinion leadership perceptions by strengthening the relationship between followers and SMI. In this direction, hypothesis H9 was developed:

- H9: Perceived interaction positively affects followers' perceptions of SMI opinion leadership.

3.8 The Effect of Taste and Opinion Leadership on the Intention to Follow Recommendations

The consumer decision-making process is shaped by the limited rationality approach. Individuals cannot access all information in the decision-making process or do not have the cognitive capacity to process it fully (Van Der Merwe & Van Heerden, 2009). The increasing information density and diversity of options in digital environments lead consumers to rely more on others' recommendations in their decision-making (Kumar & Benbasat, 2006). In this context, followers pay more attention to the recommendations of SMIs whom they perceive as reliable and knowledgeable. Indeed, it has been shown that information from opinion leaders is perceived as more valuable and explanatory (Iyengar et al., 2011) and opinion leadership has positive effects on the intention to follow recommendations (Casaló et al., 2020; Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022).

On the other hand, the visual and aesthetic nature of social media platforms amplifies the influence of taste leaders. Especially on platforms such as Instagram, where visual appeal is at the forefront, followers evaluate the SMIs they like in terms of style and aesthetics as role models (Casaló et al., 2020). Therefore, followers consider the suggestions of SMIs whose style and preferences they like to be more valuable and are more willing to follow

them. Studies show that both opinion leadership and taste leadership have significant effects on the intention to follow recommendations (Ki & Kim, 2019). Based on this theoretical and empirical framework, hypotheses H10 and H11 were developed:

- H10: Taste leadership positively affects intention to follow recommendations.
- H11: Opinion leadership positively affects intention to follow recommendations.

3.9 Sectoral Differences in the Effect of Taste Leadership and Opinion Leadership on the Intention to Follow Recommendations

One of the main motivations of this study is to examine the choice of the "right SMI" in influencer marketing from a sectoral perspective. Although the effects of SMI characteristics on consumer behavior have been widely studied, there is limited empirical evidence on whether these effects differ across sectors. Therefore, this study examines whether the effects of taste leadership and opinion leadership on intention to follow recommendations vary across fashion, travel, food, automotive, and technology. These sectors are suitable for comparison because influencer marketing is widely used in these areas and because they differ in terms of aesthetic and information-related characteristics (Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report 2025, 2025).

The relative importance of taste and opinion leadership may depend on the consumption context. Utilitarian value is mainly related to functional benefits such as product quality, usefulness, efficiency, and problem solving, whereas hedonic value focuses more on emotional, experiential, and social self-expression benefits (Zamil et al., 2023). This distinction is particularly relevant in the influencer context because influencer expertise can be evaluated through the quality of the information provided and the validity of the influencer's judgments (Kim & Kim, 2021). More generally, the effectiveness of a recommendation-related factor may depend on how well it fits the decision context. Zhang et al. (2026) support this view by showing that different recommendation approaches have different effects on intention to follow recommendations depending on the specificity of tourism goals. Applied to the present study, this suggests that the relative effects of taste and opinion leadership may also depend on the dominant experiential or informational needs of the consumption context.

Fashion, travel, and food are positioned relatively closer to the hedonic/experiential side of the continuum. Visual appeal, style, sensory experience, and experience-oriented content are more prominent in these contexts. Consumers may therefore rely more on aesthetic and experiential cues when evaluating products, experiences, and recommendations. Previous research also highlights the role of visual presentation and lifestyle-related influencer content in shaping consumer responses (De Veirman et al., 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten et al., 2020). This experiential orientation is particularly clear in tourism, where many consumption activities are experiential in nature (Zhang et al., 2026). However, travel decisions also require information search and uncertainty reduction. Thus,

experiential and informational characteristics can exist together in the same context (Mahapatra et al., 2026).

Taste leadership reflects the ability of SMIs to become reference points for followers through their style, aesthetic preferences, and taste. Its influence should therefore be more pronounced when consumption gives greater weight to subjective, aesthetic, and experiential evaluations. Accordingly, taste leadership is expected to have a stronger effect on intention to follow recommendations in fashion, travel, and food than in the relatively more utilitarian/information-intensive automotive and technology sectors.

- H12: The effect of SMI taste leadership on consumers' intention to follow recommendations is stronger in hedonic/experiential sectors than in utilitarian/information-intensive sectors.

Specifically: H12a: Fashion > Automotive; H12b: Fashion > Technology; H12c: Travel > Automotive; H12d: Travel > Technology; H12e: Food > Automotive; H12f: Food > Technology. (">" indicates that the effect is expected to be stronger in the former sector than in the latter sector.)

In contrast, automotive and technology are positioned relatively closer to the utilitarian/information-intensive side of the continuum. Product knowledge, technical features, functionality, performance, and problem solving are more important in consumer evaluations in these contexts. Consumers may therefore rely more on credible, knowledgeable, and expert sources to reduce uncertainty and make informed decisions. This is particularly relevant to opinion leadership, which refers to the ability to influence the evaluations and decisions of others through information and knowledge. Since influencer expertise is partly evaluated through information quality and the validity of the influencer's judgments (Kim & Kim, 2021), information-based influence should become relatively more important as consumption becomes more utilitarian and information intensive. Previous influencer marketing studies also show the importance of credible information, expertise, and informational value in shaping consumer responses to recommendations (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Phua et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Opinion leadership is therefore expected to have a stronger effect on intention to follow recommendations in automotive and technology than in fashion, travel, and food.

- H13: The effect of SMI opinion leadership on consumers' intention to follow recommendations is stronger in utilitarian/information-intensive sectors than in hedonic/experiential sectors.

Specifically: H13a: Automotive > Fashion; H13b: Technology > Fashion; H13c: Automotive > Travel; H13d: Technology > Travel; H13e: Automotive > Food; H13f: Technology > Food. (">" indicates that the effect is expected to be stronger in the former sector than in the latter sector.)

For example, food has a relatively hybrid structure in which aesthetic presentation, sensory experience, and informational factors can jointly shape consumer evaluations (Lee et al.,

2025; Yohanes & Ardiansyahmiraja, 2025). Similarly, although tourism is largely experiential, travel decisions often require extensive information search. Useful information provided by influencers can support followers' decision-making and their intention to follow recommendations (Mahapatra et al., 2026). Examining these differences can help explain when taste leadership or opinion leadership becomes more influential and can also support sector-specific SMI selection strategies.

The conceptual research model developed in line with the hypotheses stated above is presented in Figure 1.

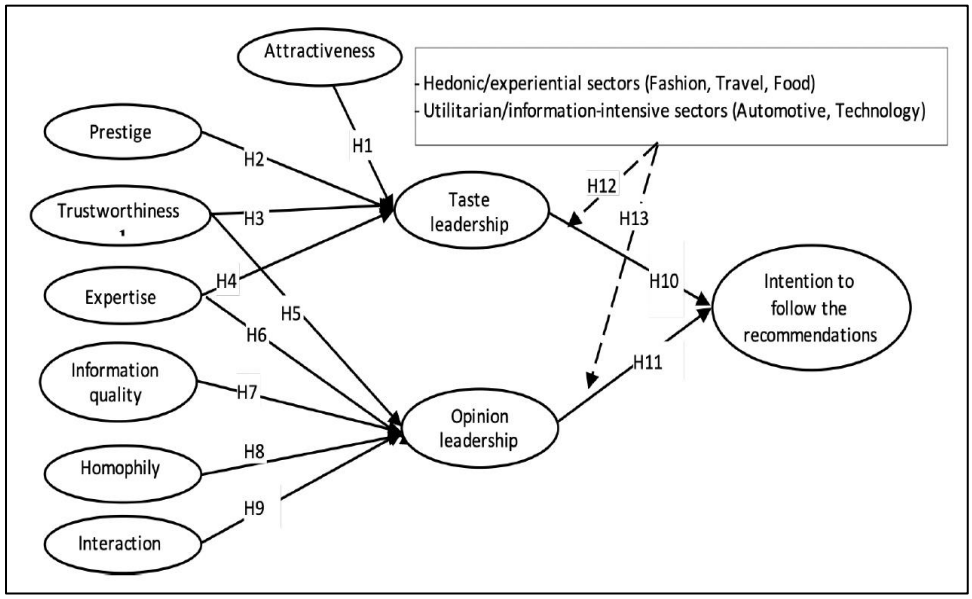

Figure 1: Conceptuaol Model

4. Research Methodology

The questionnaire consisted of measurement items for the constructs examined across the fashion, automotive, travel, technology, and food sectors, together with questions on participants' demographics and social media usage. In order to make sectoral comparisons, all measurement statements were adapted to the relevant sector. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Mersin University (Date: 05.03.2024, Decision No: 69).

The attractiveness, prestige, information quality, interaction, and taste leadership scales were adapted from Ki and Kim (2019); the trustworthiness scale from Lou and Yuan (2019); the homophily scale from Masuda et al. (2022); the expertise scale from Yuan and

Lou (2020); and the opinion leadership scale from Farivar et al. (2021). The intention to follow recommendations was measured using the scale developed by Casaló et al. (2020). Responses to all construct items were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale, with endpoints of 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 7 (Strongly Agree).

The study targeted Instagram users residing in Türkiye who followed at least one social media influencer (SMI) operating in fashion, automotive, travel, technology, or food. Convenience sampling was used. An online questionnaire was administered via Google Forms from March to May 2024, with participant recruitment supported by the company "Bilimsel Anketler". Two screening questions were used before participation: (1) "Do you currently follow at least one social media influencer on Instagram?" and (2) "In which of the following sectors does the SMI you follow operate: fashion, automotive, travel, technology, or food?" Participants who did not meet these screening criteria were not included in the study. Participants were then asked to answer the survey by considering one influencer they followed in the selected sector. Participants who followed SMIs in more than one sector selected one sector themselves and answered the survey by considering one SMI they followed in that sector. Participants took part voluntarily, provided informed consent, and were not asked to provide any personally identifying information. Participants were also informed about a gift card prize draw. A total of 1,580 valid surveys were obtained.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

	(n=1,580)		**Variables**	**(n=1,580)**	
Sector	**n**	**%**	**Age**	**n**	**%**
Fashion	327	21.0	18-25 years	490	31.0
Automotive	282	18.0	26-33 years	449	29.0
Travel	306	19.0	34-41 years	367	23.0
Technology	309	20.0	42-49 years	179	11.0
Food	356	22.0	50 years and above	95	6.0
Gender	**n**	**%**	**Time Spent on Instagram**	**n**	**%**
Female	1088	69.0	Less than 30 minutes	157	10.0
Male	492	31.0	30 min. – 1 hour	256	16.0
			1-2 hours	386	24.0
			2-3 hours	295	19.0
			3 hours +	486	31.0

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sector distribution is relatively balanced. Of the participants, 22% follow SMIs in the food sector, 21% in fashion, 20% in technology, 19% in travel, and 18% in automotive. In terms of age, 31% are between 18 and 25, 29% are between 26 and 33, 23% are between 34 and 41, 11% are between 42 and 49, and 6% are aged 50 or above. Most participants are therefore young or young adults. Regarding gender, 69% are female and 31% are male. Instagram usage also

varies among participants. While 31% use Instagram for 3 hours or more per day, 24% use it for 1–2 hours and 19% for 2–3 hours. In addition, 16% use Instagram for 30 minutes to 1 hour, while 10% use it for less than 30 minutes per day.

Potential common method bias was examined through Harman's single-factor test together with a one-factor CFA model (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Harman's test revealed a six-factor structure, with the first factor explaining 43.94% of the total variance, below the 50% threshold. In addition, the single-factor CFA model showed poor fit ($\chi^2 = 16844.891$, df = 527, $\chi^2/df = 31.964$; GFI = 0.545; PGFI = 0.483; NFI = 0.592; RMSEA = 0.140). Taken together, these findings suggest no substantial common method bias in the data.

5. Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Measurement Model Assessments

The measurement and structural models were evaluated using PLS-SEM. As reported in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs were above the recommended 0.70 threshold (Hair et al., 2022). The measurement model's suitability was then evaluated. All indicator loadings exceeded 0.60, indicating satisfactory indicator reliability (Chin et al., 2008). In this regard, when the factor loadings for the scale items were examined, it was found that this condition was met for all items.

After evaluating the measurement model's suitability, the construct validity of the scales was tested. In this context, the scales' convergent validity was first evaluated, followed by their discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR). Both measures satisfied the criteria of AVE $\geq$ 0.50 and CR $\geq$ 0.70 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Convergent validity was established for all scales.

Table 2: Construct Validity and Reliability

Constructs	Item	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Attractiveness	ATT1	0.905	0.882	0.927	0.809
	ATT2	0.903			
	ATT3	0.889			
Prestige	PRE1	0.886	0.877	0.924	0.803
	PRE2	0.907			
	PRE3	0.895			
Trustworthiness	TRS1	0.900	0.889	0.931	0.819
	TRS2	0.896			
	TRS3	0.918			
Expertise	EXP1	0.864	0.906	0.934	0.780
	EXP2	0.885			
	EXP3	0.899			
	EXP4	0.884			
Information Quality	INF1	0.926	0.847	0.929	0.867
	INF2	0.937			
Homophily	HOM1	0.909	0.918	0.942	0.803
	HOM2	0.904			
	HOM3	0.918			
	HOM4	0.852			
Interaction	INT1	0.930	0.920	0.949	0.862
	INT2	0.940			
	INT3	0.915			
Taste Leadership	TL1	0.886	0.855	0.912	0.775
	TL2	0.869			
	TL3	0.886			
Opinion Leadership	OL1	0.838	0.887	0.917	0.688
	OL2	0.835			
	OL3	0.837			
	OL4	0.829			
	OL5	0.808			
Intention to Follow Recommendations	IR1	0.883	0.924	0.946	0.814
	IR2	0.913			
	IR3	0.908			
	IR4	0.904			

To test discriminant validity, the criteria proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and the HTMT coefficients proposed by Henseler et al. (2015) were used. Fornell and Larcker (1981) argued that for discriminant validity, the square root of the AVE values must exceed the correlation coefficients between constructs. As shown in Table 3, this criterion is met.

Additionally, all HTMT coefficients were below the 0.85 threshold suggested by Henseler et al. (2015). Therefore, based on these two approaches to discriminant validity, all scales in the measurement model met the criteria, establishing construct validity. Overall, it was concluded that the measurement model meets the reliability and validity criteria and is suitable for structural model analysis.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

	INT	**HOM**	**IR**	**INF**	**ATT**	**TRS**	**OL**	**PRE**	**EXP**	**TL**
INT	**0.928**									
HOM	0.509 (0.514)	**0.896**								
IR	0.388 (0.390)	0.548 (0.549)	**0.902**							
INF	0.400 (0.402)	0.489 (0.490)	0.576 (0.577)	**0.931**						
ATT	0.280 (0.279)	0.385 (0.385)	0.546 (0.545)	0.550 (0.550)	**0.899**					
TRS	0.427 (0.428)	0.562 (0.562)	0.630 (0.630)	0.584 (0.584)	0.544 (0.544)	**0.905**				
OL	0.309 (0.308)	0.564 (0.563)	0.686 (0.685)	0.596 (0.594)	0.598 (0.598)	0.572 (0.571)	**0.829**			
PRE	0.397 (0.397)	0.490 (0.491)	0.617 (0.618)	0.619 (0.621)	0.666 (0.667)	0.654 (0.653)	0.541 (0.541)	**0.896**		
EXP	0.337 (0.338)	0.550 (0.550)	0.638 (0.637)	0.576 (0.577)	0.620 (0.620)	0.678 (0.678)	0.680 (0.679)	0.615 (0.615)	**0.883**	
TL	0.376 (0.379)	0.429 (0.431)	0.683 (0.680)	0.556 (0.555)	0.652 (0.649)	0.643 (0.643)	0.498 (0.496)	0.699 (0.698)	0.650 (0.650)	**0.880**

Notes: The diagonal and bold values are the square roots of AVE; the values in parentheses represent the HTMT values.

5.2 Structural Model Assessment

PLS-SEM was applied in the study to test the direct effect hypotheses. The structural model results indicate that the majority of the proposed hypotheses are supported (Table 4). Regarding taste leadership (TL), attractiveness ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.01$), prestige ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.01$), trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.186$, $p < 0.01$), and expertise ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.01$) all have positive and significant effects. Among these predictors, prestige demonstrates a relatively stronger effect size ($f^2 = 0.075$), while the remaining variables exhibit small effect sizes. The model explains 50.1% of the variance in taste leadership ($R^2 = 0.501$). For opinion leadership (OL), expertise emerges as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.126$). Information quality ($\beta = 0.216$, $p < 0.01$) and homophily ($\beta = 0.213$, $p < 0.01$) also have significant positive effects. Trustworthiness shows a weaker but significant effect ($\beta = 0.094$, $p < 0.01$), whereas interaction does not have a statistically significant impact ($\beta = -0.042$, $p > 0.05$). The model explains 46.9% of the variance in opinion leadership ($R^2 = 0.469$). Regarding intention to follow recommendations (IR), both taste leadership ($\beta = 0.419$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.301$) and opinion leadership ($\beta = 0.440$, $p < 0.01$; $f^2 = 0.333$) have

positive and significant effects, with medium f^2 effect sizes. The model accounts for 52.9% of the variance in intention to follow recommendations ($R^2 = 0.529$).

Table 4: Structural Model Results

Hypotheses		**β**	**SD**	**t-values**	**p-values**	**Inner VIF**	**f^2**	**Results**
H1	ATT => TL	0.213	0.035	6.165	< 0.01	1.234	0.052	Supported
H2	PRE => TL	0.267	0.035	7.559	< 0.01	1.740	0.075	Supported
H3	TRS => TL	0.186	0.034	5.384	< 0.01	1.898	0.036	Supported
H4	EXP => TL	0.197	0.034	5.762	< 0.01	1.850	0.041	Supported
H5	TRS => OL	0.094	0.030	3.163	< 0.01	1.904	0.009	Supported
H6	EXP => OL	0.349	0.032	10.798	< 0.01	1.883	0.126	Supported
H7	INF => OL	0.216	0.027	8.073	< 0.01	1.831	0.057	Supported
H8	HOM => OL	0.213	0.029	7.291	< 0.01	1.540	0.051	Supported
H9	INT => OL	-0.042	0.023	1.772	> 0.05	1.669	0.002	Not Supported
H10	TL => IR	0.419	0.029	14.298	< 0.01	1.362	0.301	Supported
H11	OL => IR	0.440	0.028	15.430	< 0.01	1.234	0.333	Supported
Taste leadership $R^2 = 0.501$; Opinion leadership $R^2 = 0.469$; Intention to follow recommendations $R^2 = 0.529$								

Finally, inner VIF values range between 1.234 and 1.904, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the structural model. Overall, the findings suggest that SMI attributes significantly shape leadership perceptions, which in turn strongly influence consumers' intention to follow recommendations.

5.3 Measurement Invariance Assessment (MICOM)

To examine whether the effects of perceived taste and opinion leadership on intention to follow recommendations differ between predominantly hedonic/experiential sectors (fashion, travel, and food) and predominantly utilitarian/information-intensive sectors (automotive and technology), Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was conducted for the theoretically relevant cross-category sector comparisons. Before these group comparisons, measurement invariance was assessed using the MICOM procedure (Henseler et al., 2015).

First, configural invariance was established by using the same measurement model, indicators, data treatment procedures, and algorithm settings across the sector groups. Second, compositional invariance was confirmed for all sector comparisons through permutation tests. The correlations between the composite scores were close to 1, and the permutation results supported compositional invariance. Third, the equality of composite means and variances was examined. As shown in Table 5, equality of means and variances was not established for all constructs across the sector comparisons. Therefore, full measurement invariance was achieved only for some construct-level comparisons.

Specifically, full measurement invariance was established for IR in the fashion–automotive comparison; for TL and IR in the fashion–technology comparison; for TL and IR in the

automotive–travel comparison; and for TL in the automotive–food comparison. In the travel–technology and technology–food comparisons, full measurement invariance was not established for any of the examined constructs. However, configural and compositional invariance were established for all comparisons, confirming partial measurement invariance. According to Henseler et al. (2015) and Hair et al. (2022), partial measurement invariance is sufficient for comparing standardized path coefficients across groups using PLS-MGA. Therefore, the MICOM results support the methodological appropriateness of the subsequent multi-group comparisons (Table 5).

Table 5A: MICOM Results

			Compositional Invariance		
Condition (Industry)	Const.	Con. Inv.	C=1	Permut. p-value	Partial Invariance
Fashion vs. Automotive	TL	Yes	1.000	0.798	Yes
	OL	Yes	1.000	0.946	Yes
	IR	Yes	1.000	0.996	Yes
Fashion vs. Technology	TL	Yes	0.999	0.268	Yes
	OL	Yes	1.000	0.210	Yes
	IR	Yes	1.000	0.696	Yes
Automotive vs. Travel	TL	Yes	1.000	0.180	Yes
	OL	Yes	1.000	0.486	Yes
	IR	Yes	1.000	0.992	Yes
Automotive vs. Food	TL	Yes	1.000	0.120	Yes
	OL	Yes	1.000	0.892	Yes
	IR	Yes	1.000	0.780	Yes
Travel vs. Technology	TL	Yes	1.000	0.128	Yes
	OL	Yes	0.999	0.078	Yes
	IR	Yes	1.000	0.784	Yes
Technology vs. Food	TL	Yes	1.000	0.214	Yes
	OL	Yes	1.000	0.062	Yes
	IR	Yes	1.000	0.684	Yes

Table 5B: MICOM Results

	Equal Mean Value		**Equal Variances**		
Condition (Industry)	Dif.	Confidence Interval	Dif.	Confidence Interval	Full Inv.
Fashion vs. Automotive	-0.310	[-0.149; 0.158]	0.206	[-0.253; 0.236]	No
	0.436	[-0.145; 0.161]	-0.119	[-0.221; 0.213]	No
	-0.113	[-0.149; 0.161]	0.104	[-0.176; 0.196]	Yes
Fashion vs. Technology	0.151	[-0.146; 0.173]	0.100	[-0.231; 0.199]	Yes
	0.384	[-0.156; 0.150]	-0.289	[-0.197; 0.194]	No
	0.068	[-0.140; 0.152]	-0.118	[-0.164; 0.196]	Yes
Automotive vs. Travel	0.107	[-0.153; 0.148]	0.028	[-0.260; 0.280]	Yes
	-0.507	[-0.171; 0.168]	0.412	[-0.258; 0.221]	No
	-0.110	[-0.157; 0.165]	0.142	[-0.230; 0.237]	Yes
Automotive vs. Food	0.019	[-0.142; 0.164]	0.205	[-0.266; 0.257]	Yes
	-0.583	[-0.150; 0.159]	0.194	[-0.262; 0.231]	No
	-0.351	[-0.161; 0.160]	0.228	[-0.235; 0.218]	No
Travel vs. Technology	0.371	[-0.158; 0.150]	-0.134	[-0.241; 0.258]	No
	0.446	[-0.157; 0.146]	-0.581	[-0.225; 0.246]	No
	0.285	[-0.138; 0.155]	-0.365	[-0.202; 0.216]	No
Technology Vs. Food	-0.453	[-0.145; 0.148]	0.317	[-0.228; 0.200]	No
	-0.527	[-0.136; 0.149]	0.364	[-0.239; 0.227]	No
	-0.506	[-0.132; 0.145]	0.450	[-0.202; 0.204]	No

5.4 Multi-Group Analysis (PLS-MGA) Results

To examine whether the effects of taste leadership and opinion leadership on intention to follow recommendations differ between predominantly hedonic/experiential sectors (fashion, travel, and food) and predominantly utilitarian/information-intensive sectors (automotive and technology), a PLS-SEM-based Multi-Group Analysis (PLS-MGA) was conducted. The results presented in Table 6 reveal sectoral differences in both relationships.

For the TL → IR path, significant differences were found in all six comparisons. The effect of taste leadership was significantly stronger in fashion than in automotive ($\Delta\beta = 0.247$, $p < 0.01$) and technology ($\Delta\beta = 0.306$, $p < 0.01$), in travel than in automotive ($\Delta\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.01$) and technology ($\Delta\beta = 0.301$, $p < 0.01$), and in food than in automotive ($\Delta\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.01$) and technology ($\Delta\beta = 0.304$, $p < 0.01$). These results consistently demonstrate that taste leadership has a stronger effect on intention to follow recommendations in hedonic/experiential sectors than in utilitarian/information-intensive sectors.

For the OL → IR path, significant differences were observed in four of the six comparisons. The effect of opinion leadership was significantly stronger in technology than in fashion ($\Delta\beta = 0.230$, $p < 0.01$), travel ($\Delta\beta = 0.339$, $p < 0.01$), and food ($\Delta\beta = 0.270$, $p < 0.01$).

Opinion leadership also had a significantly stronger effect in automotive than in travel ($\Delta\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.01$). However, no significant differences were found between fashion and automotive ($\Delta\beta = 0.122$, $p > 0.05$) or between food and automotive ($\Delta\beta = 0.162$, $p > 0.05$). Overall, these findings indicate that opinion leadership tends to exert a stronger effect in utilitarian/information-intensive sectors, although this pattern is not consistent across all comparisons. Accordingly, H12 and all its sub-hypotheses (H12a–H12f) are supported. H13 is partially supported: H13b, H13c, H13d, and H13f are supported, whereas H13a and H13e are not supported.

Table 6: Multiple Group Analysis Results

Hypotheses		**Comparison**	**Δβ(β1-β2)**	**p-value**	**Sub-Hypothesis Results**	**Overall Hypothesis Results**
H12: TL => IR	H12a	Fashion (1) vs. Automotive (2)	0.247	< 0.01	Supported	Supported
	H12b	Fashion (1) vs. Technology (2)	0.306	< 0.01	Supported	
	H12c	Travel (1) vs. Automotive (2)	0.240	< 0.01	Supported	
	H12d	Travel (1) vs. Technology (2)	0.301	< 0.01	Supported	
	H12e	Food (1) vs. Automotive (2)	0.244	< 0.01	Supported	
	H12f	Food (1) vs. Technology (2)	0.304	< 0.01	Supported	
H13: OL => IR	H13a	Automotive (1) vs Fashion (2)	0.122	> 0.05	Not Supported	Partially Supported
	H13b	Technology (1) vs. Fashion (2)	0.230	< 0.01	Supported	
	H13c	Automotive (1) vs Travel (2)	0.228	< 0.01	Supported	
	H13d	Technology (1) vs. Travel (2)	0.339	< 0.01	Supported	
	H13e	Automotive (1) vs. Food (2)	0.162	> 0.05	Not Supported	
	H13f	Technology (1) vs. Food (2)	0.270	< 0.01	Supported	

6. Evaluation of Research Findings

The findings indicate that taste leadership and opinion leadership do not have exactly the same antecedents, although trustworthiness and expertise contribute to both. Both forms of leadership also increase followers' intention to follow recommendations, but their relative importance varies across consumption contexts. For taste leadership, attractiveness and prestige have significant positive effects. This finding is understandable given the aesthetic

and symbolic nature of taste leadership. McQuarrie et al. (2013), for example, associate aesthetic and attractive content with stronger perceptions of taste, while Goldfarb and Tucker (2011) draw attention to the role of visual attractiveness in digital environments. Prestige also appears relevant in this process. Previous research links prestige with aesthetic evaluations (Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012) and suggests that higher social status can contribute to stronger aesthetic evaluations (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). These relationships can also be considered from the perspective of Social Identity Theory. Followers may be attracted to SMIs who represent a desirable identity, status, or lifestyle. When an SMI is perceived as both attractive and prestigious, followers may therefore use that person as a reference when forming their own aesthetic and symbolic consumption preferences.

Trustworthiness positively influences both taste and opinion leadership. This finding is consistent with Jegham and Bouzaabia (2022) for opinion leadership and Fakhreddin (2025) for taste leadership. According to Source Credibility Theory, credible sources have greater persuasive power (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Trustworthiness may therefore increase the acceptance of information in opinion leadership and trust in the influencer's personal and aesthetic choices in taste leadership. Trustworthiness can therefore be considered a common foundation of both the informational and aesthetic influence of SMIs. Expertise also positively influences both forms of leadership. Previous studies show that expert SMIs are perceived as more credible and persuasive (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Chai et al., 2023). Knowledge and expertise are central elements of opinion leadership (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013; Tabar et al., 2025). Korzynski et al. (2025) further show that expertise-based content strengthens opinion leadership and indirectly increases intention to follow recommendations. The positive effect of expertise on taste leadership suggests that aesthetic judgment is not based only on visual or subjective evaluations. In line with McQuarrie et al. (2013) and Pérez-Cabañero et al. (2023), followers may evaluate an influencer's aesthetic choices together with his or her knowledge, experience, and selectivity.

Homophily has a positive effect on opinion leadership, supporting the importance of perceived similarity in social network relationships (Colleoni et al., 2014) and its role in opinion leadership (Wu & Guo, 2024). Social Identity Theory suggests that followers may value the opinions of influencers who share similar values, interests, or lifestyles. Two-Step Flow Theory also suggests that social closeness and trust can strengthen an influencer's role as an information intermediary. In contrast, interaction does not have a significant effect on opinion leadership, indicating that frequent communication alone may not be sufficient to establish opinion leadership. Previous studies emphasize information value, trustworthiness, and expertise in influencer effectiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2019), as well as expertise, trustworthiness, and perceived authority in opinion leadership (Korzynski et al., 2025). Interaction may facilitate communication, but it may not create the knowledge-based authority required for opinion leadership.

Both opinion leadership and taste leadership positively influence the intention to follow recommendations. Opinion leaders may be more relevant when followers seek information, while taste leaders may provide guidance about aesthetics and lifestyle. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Chen et al., 2023; Jeyhan & Pangaribuan, 2023; Ki & Kim, 2019). Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals can shape their behavior by observing trustworthy, successful, or desirable individuals (Bandura, 1977). Accordingly, opinion leaders may provide information-based models, while taste leaders may provide aesthetic and symbolic models. Parasocial relationships offer an additional explanation, as familiarity, psychological closeness, and trust may increase followers' willingness to accept influencer guidance. Previous literature also supports the relevance of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership in consumer behavior (Korzynski et al., 2025). However, parasocial relationships were not measured in this study and should therefore be considered only as a complementary theoretical explanation rather than a tested mechanism.

Sectoral comparisons are one of the important contributions of this study. In the study, sectors were not strictly classified as hedonic or utilitarian. Instead, fashion, travel, and food were treated predominantly as hedonic/experiential contexts. Automotive and technology were considered predominantly as utilitarian/information-intensive contexts. The PLS-MGA results show that the effect of taste leadership on the intention to follow recommendations is significantly stronger in each of the fashion, travel, and food sectors compared to both the automotive and technology sectors. This finding suggests that taste leadership aligns more closely with consumer needs in contexts where aesthetic preferences, experiences, lifestyle, pleasure, and symbolic value are more important. The results for the fashion sector strongly support this interpretation. Casaló et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of visual and stylistic elements in influencer influence. Zebal et al. (2026) highlight the importance of identity, prestige, privilege, and symbolic meaning in fashion consumption. From a Social Identity Theory perspective, consumers may not only view an influencer's choices as product recommendations, but also as indicators of a desired identity and lifestyle. This could explain why taste leadership has a stronger impact in a context like fashion, where visibility and symbolic consumption are important (Brown, 2000). The findings regarding the travel sector are also consistent with the experiential consumption approach. Schouten et al. (2020) demonstrate that visual and experience-oriented influencer content can shape consumer responses. Raza et al. (2026) link travel intentions to experiential and motivational processes such as travel inspiration, thrill-seeking, and autonomous self-motivation. However, the experiential nature of travel does not mean that opinion leadership is unimportant.

A complementary pattern appears for opinion leadership. Its effect is significantly stronger in technology than in fashion, travel, and food. In automotive, the effect is also stronger than in travel, but the automotive–fashion and automotive–food differences are not

significant. Thus, the pattern is not completely uniform. The technology result in particular shows the greater importance of expertise and informational guidance in information-intensive consumption contexts. This interpretation is consistent with Phua et al. (2020) and Sokolova and Kefi (2020). From the perspective of Two-Step Flow Theory, this result suggests that consumers may rely more on credible opinion leaders who select, interpret, and simplify information when information-processing needs increase. Opinion leaders can therefore act as information intermediaries and reduce the consumer's information-processing burden. At the same time, the role of experiential factors in technology shows that the hedonic–utilitarian distinction is not absolute. It is more appropriate to position sectors along a continuum based on the relative importance of experiential and informational needs.

Overall, the sectoral findings support a contextual fit or contingency perspective. In predominantly hedonic/experiential contexts, aesthetic, symbolic, and lifestyle-based guidance gains more importance. This can increase the relative influence of taste leadership. In predominantly utilitarian/information-intensive contexts, expertise, knowledge, and uncertainty reduction are more important. Therefore, the relative influence of opinion leadership may be stronger in these contexts. However, the findings do not support a definitive distinction between hedonic and utilitarian consumption. This interpretation is consistent with Zhang et al. (2026), who showed that the effectiveness of recommendations depends on their alignment with the decision context and consumer goals. It also aligns with Mahapatra et al. (2026), who revealed the role of influencers in shaping follower engagement in the context of travel, an experiential area of consumption. Source Credibility Theory explains the shared role of trustworthiness and expertise. Social Identity Theory explains identification based on aesthetics, prestige, and similarity, while Two-Step Flow Theory explains the role of opinion leaders as information intermediaries. Social Learning Theory provides a complementary explanation for how these leadership perceptions may translate into behavioral responses.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the influencer marketing literature by examining opinion leadership and taste leadership within the same framework. Although both forms of leadership positively influence followers' intention to follow recommendations, they are not shaped by the same antecedents. Trustworthiness and expertise are important for both opinion leadership and taste leadership. In contrast, attractiveness and prestige are particularly relevant to taste leadership, while information quality and homophily are related to opinion leadership. This pattern is consistent with Source Credibility Theory and Social Identity Theory, as SMI leadership involves both credibility-based and identity-related characteristics.

The findings also add a sectoral perspective to the literature. The influence of taste leadership is stronger in predominantly hedonic/experiential contexts, while opinion leadership tends to be more influential in predominantly utilitarian/information-intensive

contexts. Thus, the importance of these two forms of leadership changes with the consumption context. This result also contributes to the Two-Step Flow perspective by showing that the influence of SMIs may differ depending on the needs associated with the consumption context.

6.2 Managerial Implications

For businesses working with SMIs, influencer selection should consider more than follower numbers. The findings suggest that the type of leadership expected from an SMI should also fit the consumption context. In fashion, travel, and food, where hedonic and experiential characteristics are more prominent, businesses may benefit more from SMIs who offer aesthetic, symbolic, and lifestyle-based guidance. In technology and automotive, where utilitarian and information-intensive characteristics are more prominent, expertise, trustworthiness, and high-quality information become more relevant. Trustworthiness and expertise deserve particular attention because they contribute to both taste leadership and opinion leadership. By contrast, interaction alone does not significantly contribute to opinion leadership. These results suggest that businesses should select SMIs according to both their characteristics and the type of guidance consumers are likely to seek in a particular consumption context.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several methodological, theoretical, and measurement-related limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling and data collected only from Instagram users in Türkiye may limit the generalizability of the findings. The cross-sectional and self-reported nature of the data also limits causal conclusions. Future studies could use longitudinal or experimental designs and examine different countries and platforms. Second, the sectors were positioned along a hedonic/experiential–utilitarian/information-intensive continuum rather than directly measuring participants' perceptions of these characteristics. Future studies could directly measure these characteristics. Finally, the study examined a specific set of antecedents and did not directly measure other potential mechanisms, such as parasocial relationships. Future research could examine these mechanisms and compare different types of SMIs, such as micro-, macro-, and celebrity influencers.

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Declaration of AI Use

The manuscript was primarily written and revised by the authors. AI-based tools were used only in a limited manner for language polishing and minor grammatical refinement to improve clarity and readability of the manuscript. No AI tools were used for generating data, analysis, or the core intellectual content of the study. The theoretical arguments, methodology, results, and interpretations were entirely developed by the authors.

Data Availability

The datasets are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest / no competing interests.

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