

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS ON CUSTOMER BUYING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract: *In today's digital era, social media influencers have become a powerful force in shaping consumer buying behavior. Consumers are increasingly turning to social media influencers for recommendations and advise on products and services before making a purchase. This development has been driven by the unparalleled increase in influencers' presence on social media platforms, which has generated new venues for companies to connect with their desired demographic and interact with them in a more genuine and significant manner. Numerous studies have been conducted on the topic of celebrity endorsements and the purpose of the research was to discover how social media influencers influenced the purchase intention of customer. The social media influencers became the third party which provided information about products to the social media audience. Those who had the same self-concept with the influencers often viewed them as role models in consumption. This study aims to examine the role of trustworthiness, expertise, and information quality of social media influencers in influencing customer buying behavior.*

Keywords: *Social Media Influencer, Purchase Intention, Trustworthiness, Expertise, Information Quality, Customer Buying Behavior*

Introduction

Nowadays, social media usage is one of the most prominent and favoured online activities among individuals and organizations. As stated in the report by Statista, social media usage is one of the most popular online activities. In 2022, over 4.59 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 6 billion in 2027 (Statista,2022). Social networking is one of the most popular digital activities worldwide and it is no surprise that social networking penetration across all regions is constantly increasing (Statista,2022). As of January 2023, the global social media usage rate stood at 59 percent (Statista,2022). This figure is anticipated to grow as lesser developed digital markets catch up with other regions when it comes to infrastructure development and the availability of cheap mobile devices. In fact, most of social media's global growth is driven by the increasing usage of mobile devices. Mobile-first market Eastern Asia topped the global ranking of mobile social networking penetration, followed by established digital powerhouses such as the Americas and Northern Europe.

In addition, the time spent by internet users on social media and other messaging apps is around 144 minutes per day, and this is also on an increasing trend (Statista, 2021a). Another report by Smart Insights estimated that 53.6% of the world's population uses social media, and the average daily time spent on social media is 145 minutes (Chaffey, 2021). The report by Datareportal (2021) stated that there is 4.2 billion or 53 per cent of the world's population are social media users, and there is a 13 per cent year-on-year growth. The time spent worldwide on social media is 2.25 hours. In Malaysia, the time spent on social media is much higher at 3.01 hours. The report also stated that 44.8% of internet users search for brand information on social media. In Malaysia, 59.5 per cent of internet users search social media for brand information (Statista, 2021b). The growth of social media and the time spent on social media have transformed marketing (Chaffey, 2021). This has also led to the usage and influence of social media influencers. In social media marketing promotions and campaigns, the deployment of social media influencers is gaining higher demand (De Veirman *et al.*, 2016). The advent of technology and social media has contributed to the rise of social media influencers, and more marketers and retailers are using them to boost revenue and sales (Glucksman, 2017; Vodak *et al.*, 2019; Rupchandani, 2020).

The study by Markets and Markets (2020) revealed that the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of influencer marketing platforms is expected to increase from USD 6.0 billion in 2020 to USD 24.1 billion by 2025. A survey by Linqia (2020) revealed that influencer marketing is now more mature and possess the necessary skills and know-how to assist brands in connecting in meaningful ways with target customers. Furthermore, it was reported that around 40% of marketers ran six or more campaigns in 2019 and 57% plan to allocate higher budgets to influencer marketing in 2020. Social media influencers are also getting greater attention in Malaysia. The statistics provided by Statista (2021) showed that around 75 per cent of Malaysian consumers are aware of social media influencers and have followed at least one influencer on social media. It was also reported that companies in Malaysia are changing their marketing tactics by allocating greater budgets to engage social influencers (The Star, 2020). One of the strategies used by marketers to strengthen their brand presence and increase sales is by using influencer marketing. One of the most effective channels in the marketing mix today is influencer marketing (Dhesi, 2020).

Studies have shown that social media influencers are used to influence customers' purchasing behaviours (Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019). Previous studies have revealed a positive

association between influencer endorsement and purchasing behaviour of consumers (Wiedmann and Metternheim, 2019; Woodroof, 2019; Taillon *et al.*, 2019). The results of a study by Jin *et al.*, (2019) revealed that consumers perceived endorsement of products by celebrities on Instagram as more trustworthy and they showed a positive attitude towards the brands that were endorsed by celebrities. Similarly, another study by Pick (2020) revealed that social media influencers had a favourable impact on the buying behaviour of consumers. Another study by Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2019) examined the relevance of influencers' attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness in online campaigns and found that trustworthiness followed by attractiveness were the strongest components of brand loyalty and trust that led to purchasing intention.

However, the results of another study by AlFarraj *et al.*, (2021) revealed that influencer attractiveness and expertise had a significant impact on customers engagement. The study found that the influencers attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were not significant predictors of purchasing intention. This shows that the results from past studies are not consistent. The above review shows that social media usage is now very high and still growing. The importance of social media influencers is also growing in demand. However, in addition to the inconsistent results shown by past studies, there is a dearth of empirical studies that have examined the impact of social media influencers' endorsements on purchasing intentions. Therefore, it is vital to investigate and determine the factors contribute to the customer buying behavior. By investigating these relationships, this research seeks to contribute to the existing literature on influencer marketing and provide valuable insights for businesses looking to optimize their influencer marketing strategies.

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

"Social media influencers (SMIs)" are users who have the potential to inspire engagement, stimulate discourse, and/or close deals with the desired target audience. These users can include celebrities as well as more narrowly targeted professional or nonprofessional "peers" (Kim & Kim, 2021). Based on the extent of their following, SMIs are classed as micro-influencers with up to 10,000 followers or macro-influencers with up to 100,000 followers (Voorveld, 2019). SMIs are employed in marketing initiatives because they are regarded to be more genuine and dependable than marketer-generated messages. The supply of high-quality information is therefore necessarily needed to maintain the efficacy of SMIs for marketing engagement (Zhou *et al.*, 2021). The benefits of SMIs' characteristics and abilities make them great spokespeople for businesses and organizations (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). SMIs can learn more about the kind of meanings that might be presented to and understood by their followers in order to persuade and influence them (Zhou *et al.*, 2021).

SMIs are understood as social media users who are famous in a niche area with many followers and can convince their followers to follow their endorsements in the decision-making processes (Lou and Yuan, 2019). In the past, the classification of SMIs was restricted to only those who became popular through their social media activities, excluding traditional celebrities who found fame from acting and/or singing (Khamis *et al.*, 2016). However, nowadays, there is no distinct boundary to differentiate between an SMIs and a traditional celebrity, as a person can possess both identities. Hence, SMIs include anyone, ranging from a blogger, a traditional celebrity or an online entrepreneur, who disseminates information related to products, health and lifestyles on social media platforms (Zhou *et al.*, 2020).

The previous study on the impact of SMIs marketing are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Previous Studies on Social Media Influencers

Author(s)	Theory	Factors
(Masuda <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	Theory of persuasion	Attitude homophily Physical attractiveness Social attractiveness Trustworthiness Perceived expertise Parasocial relationship
(D. Y. Kim & Kim, 2021)	Social exchange theory	Expertise Authenticity Physical attractiveness Homophily Trust
(Pop <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	Customer journey theory	Trust
(Jin <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	Meaning transfer and source credibility model	Social presence
(Ki <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	Human brand theory	Ideality Relatedness Competence
(Lee & Eastin, 2021)	Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers	Sincerity Trustful endorsements Visibility Expertise Uniqueness
(Leung <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	Uncertainty reduction theory Self-categorization theory	Self-disclosure Prototype clarity Self-prototypicality Trust Social attraction

The Intention to Use and Behaviours of Consumer

The intention to use and behaviours of consumers can be explained using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Based on this theory, consumer action or behaviour is explained by his or her behavioural intentions, according to this idea. Consumer's attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms all influence their behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 1991). As a result, a consumer's behavioural intentions are indicators of how determined or strong that individual is to engage in or execute a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour is the most important predictor of a person's actual behaviour is their behavioural intention. Past studies have shown that social media influencers can affect the behaviour intention of consumers (Taillon *et al.*, 2019; Chetioui, Benlafqih, and Lebdaoui, 2019; Wiedman and Mettenheim, 2019). The study by Taillon *et al.*, showed that retailers utilize social media influencers to market their products and brands. Another study by Ki and Kim (2019) found that the social media influencers attractiveness, prestige, expertise, informativeness and interactive contents towards the attitude and intention to purchase. The study by Chetioui, Benlafqih, and Lebdaoui (2020) confirmed that consumers attitudes toward fashion influencers had a positive and significant impact on brand attitude and purchase intention. The study further revealed that perceived

credibility, trust, perceived behavioural control, perceived subjective norms, perceived expertise, and perceived congruence had a positive and significant association with attitudes. Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2021) confirmed that only the influencer's trustworthiness followed by attractiveness is a positive and significant predictor of brand loyalty and purchasing intention. On the contrary, the study by AlFarraj *et al.*, (2021) found that the influencers' attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise did not significantly impact purchasing intention. This shows that the results from past studies are not consistent.

Conceptual Framework

Parasocial Relationship (PSR) Theory

Relationships with media figures are known as parasocial relationships (PSR) (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). It can be explained as having a close relationship with a media character that fosters parasocial ties (Hu *et al.*, 2020). Thanks to the social media world, SMIs and followers have a more favourable platform for building intense connections and interactions. Through social media, SMIs may communicate with customers immediately and reveal details of their day-to-day life in the first person with ease (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers (PASMIs Model)

Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers (PASMIs) has been developed by Lee and Eastin (2021). It gave a thorough grasp of what customers believed an authentic SMIs mean. Sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness are the five distinct constructs they suggested. Donors are drawn to SMIs because of their sincerity, as well as their honesty, kindness, and integrity, all of which closely reflect the concept of sincerity (Al-Emadi & Ben Yahia, 2020; Lee & Eastin, 2020). SMIs' sincerity is more successful in explaining why donors have a positive attitude while promoting a donation campaign. While truthful endorsement can be explained as intended to avoid any misunderstandings, SMIs make an effort to be open about their connections by openly disclosing any content that has been compensated to their followers. They also aim to foster a sense of sincerity by offering objective reviews of goods and services (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), SMIs' endorsements will increase consumers' brand awareness and product acquisition. Engagement and follower growth are necessary for visibility, so SMIs took different routes to achieve this goal (Cotter, 2019). Due to the increased sense of camaraderie and intimacy in relationships, well-recognized personalities on social media increase friendliness and even improve the quality of their followers' lives (Kim & Kim, 2020). Such a favourable affective response strengthens perceptions of reliability and increases readiness to buy any SMIs' brand endorsement (Chung & Cho, 2017). The level of perceived comprehension, abilities, and knowledge of the SMIs can be used to define expertise. Therefore, highly trustworthy sources are more likely to persuade people that the intended message is true (Masuda *et al.*, 2022). According to Kim and Kim (2021), more frequent and in-depth interactions are required for competence to foster confidence. In other words, for followers to acknowledge the influencer's skill and depend on the relationship, more time and interactions are required. SMIs' uniqueness is the distinction from other SMIs in terms of both character and content are the foundation of one's own actions and beliefs (Lee & Eastin, 2021). The manner in which SMIs engage audiences and foster a deeper level of interpersonal connection exemplifies their singularity (Jin *et al.*, 2019). As a result, being seen as unique can lead to the development of an admirable personal brand (Casaló *et al.*, 2020). This study aims to examine the role of trustworthiness, expertise, and information quality of social media influencers in shaping customer buying behavior. By investigating these relationships, this

research seeks to contribute to the existing literature on influencer marketing and provide valuable insights for businesses looking to optimize their influencer marketing strategies.

Effects Of Influencer Attributes (Trustworthiness, Expertise, And Information Quality) On Consumers' Purchase Intention.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of an influencer refers to the degree to which consumers perceive an influencer as reliable, honest, and credible in their endorsements, recommendations, or opinions about products and services (Abdullah *et al.*, 2020). Trust is a crucial factor in influencer marketing, as it directly influences consumers' perceptions of the messages delivered by opinion leaders and affects their behavior (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). When consumers perceive an influencer as trustworthy, they are more likely to be receptive to their messages, engage with their content, and follow their recommendations, ultimately resulting in increased purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Similarly, Saima & Khan (2020) found that trust in influencers positively influenced consumers' purchase intentions and influencer's credibility. Additionally, in qualitative research conducted by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), they found that online celebrities' trustworthiness significantly affects young females' purchase intentions.

Expertise

The influencer's expertise refers to the perceived knowledge, experience, and competence of an influencer in a particular domain or industry (Ohanian, 1990). Expertise is an essential component of source credibility, and it can influence consumers' perceptions and receptivity to the messages conveyed by the sender (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Expertise can enhance the persuasive power of the influencer's message and the likelihood of consumers adopting their suggestions (Shen, 2021). In addition, empirical studies have shown mixed results regarding the impact of influencers' expertise on purchase intention. For instance, several empirical studies have investigated the impact of influencers' expertise on purchase intention, but the results have been mixed. Lou & Yuan (2019) did not find a direct effect of expertise on purchase intention, while AlFarraj *et al.*, (2021) did not find such an effect in the aesthetic dermatology industry, and Gomes *et al.*, (2022) did not find it in relation to fashion products. Similarly, Widyanto & Agusti (2020) found similar results among Generation Z consumers in Indonesia. However, other studies have found positive effects. For example, Abdullah *et al.* (2020) found positive results in the fashion industry. Likewise, Weismueller, Harrigan, Wang, & Soutar (2020) found the relation positive in the German cosmetics market. Also, Hmoud *et al.*, (2022) found the same results for Jordanian consumers. These findings suggested that expertise had an effect on purchase intention across many markets. By demonstrating their expertise in their domain, influencers can gain the trust of their audience, increasing the likelihood of consumers making purchases based on their recommendations.

Information Quality

Information quality refers to the accuracy, reliability, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the information presented to consumers (Wang & Strong, 1996). Information quality is a critical aspect of social media marketing messages, as it encompasses the accuracy, authenticity, and believability of the content (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). (Erkan & Evans, 2016; EstebanSantos, García Medina, Carey, & Bellido-Pérez, 2018) has found that the perceived quality of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) information positively influences information usefulness, adoption, and purchase intention. Similarly, Magno (2017) argues that

high-quality content, such as that found in blogs, leads to stronger engagement and increased purchase intention for recommended products. Van-Tien Dao, Nhat Hanh Le, Ming-Sung Cheng, & Chao Chen (2014) in their study verified that advertising value, which was determined by the perceived informativeness, entertainment, and credibility of the advertisement, had a significant impact on consumers' purchase intentions. In the context of influencer marketing, the quality, originality, and uniqueness of posts have been identified as key factors in developing opinion leadership (Casaló *et al.*, 2020). Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) also found that quality of posts is essential for users' decisions to follow digital influencers. Influencers generate regular social media updates with both informational and entertainment value (Lou & Yuan, 2019). How followers respond to branded posts can be influenced by how they perceive the informative value of the content. In addition, many empirical studies have shown varying results on the effect of influencer information quality on purchase intention. (Hmoud *et al.*, 2022) in the Jordanian market, (Gomes *et al.*, 2022) in fashion products, and (Lou & Yuan, 2019) found that influencer information quality had a significant effect on purchase intention. However, Saima & Khan (2020) did not find an effect in their study.

Conclusion

Social media influencers have become a powerful force in the world of marketing, with their ability to sway consumer behavior and influence purchase decisions. Their reach and influence on social media platforms have revolutionized the way brands promote their products or services. This study highlights the positive impact of social media influencers on purchase intention. When consumers perceive a social media influencer as influential, they are more likely to engage with the content, expect value from the recommended brand, and have a higher intention to purchase the recommend brand. This shows the persuasive power of digital influencers in driving consumer behavior and the importance of incorporating influencer marketing strategies into brand campaigns. The integration of social media and mobile commerce has provided consumers with new opportunities for social interactions and shopping experience.

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