

# Influence Unleashed: How Social Media Influencers' Credibility Drives Viral Success

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study aims to examine the factors of social media influencers' credibility in viral marketing on consumers' purchase intention.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A quantitative research approach by using an online questionnaire survey as the research tool to collect data from respondents in Malaysia who are aged between 18 to 34 years old and have social media accounts.

**Findings:** Four hypotheses were formulated in this conceptual paper based on the previous considerations and the Source Credibility Model theory.

**Research limitations/implications:** This research feasibly focuses on the perspectives of social media users in Malaysia aged between 18 to 34 years old.

**Practical implications:** This study will most likely be useful to businesses who want to work with social media influencers to advertise their goods and services on social media. This is because influencers have demonstrated a promising trend in connecting with potential clients on social media.

**Originality/value:** The body of information on social media influencers and purchase intention has been expanded by this study. By adding the Malaysian perspective on the function and credibility of social media influencers in influencing customers' intention to acquire the products or services, the adoption of the Source Credibility Model theory would thus highlight the goal of this study. The importance of consumers' perceptions of social media influencers can also be explored in this study, adding to the body of knowledge on this topic.

**Keywords:** Viral marketing, social media influencer, social media influencers' credibility, source credibility model, purchase intention

## **Introduction**

Social media, also known as social networking, has emerged as one of the key components of the modern world since individuals utilize it wherever they are. Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, TikTok, and Twitter are well-known social media platforms used to interact and connect with others, including family, friends, fans, and audiences. There are numerous benefits that people can gain from using all of these social media platforms, including the ability to engage with others, receive news and information, develop relationships, and share thoughts and opinions with others (Mali, 2022). It is reasonable to anticipate that every firm will start to alter its marketing strategies by utilizing social media as a result of the rising number of social media users. Marketing is crucial, especially for businesses that want to advertise their goods and services to the public (Mali, 2022). Generally, companies and company owners can use social media to reach new and vast audiences. Doing this can help businesses interact, engage, and establish relationships with potential customers.

Aside from that, as traditional marketing tactics to attract customers become less appealing, firms are beginning to shift to technological approaches to catch customers' attention and interest in the items and services offered. Viral marketing is a common marketing strategy utilized by most businesses today. According to (Hamade, 2021), because of the growing popularity of the internet and social media, businesses can shift from traditional marketing approaches to modern online platforms marketing in order to successfully reach potential clients at a low cost.

Social media influencers are a new trend that has emerged in most nations, including Malaysia, as a result of user participation in social media. Users that have gained a lot of followers on social media by producing textual or visual content and sharing it there are known as social media influencers (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Their widespread participation in social media has established itself as an advantageous chance for businesses to work together and market their goods and services to clients, particularly those who are active on social media.

Although social media viral marketing can have a good effect on a firm, it can also have a negative effect, particularly in terms of reputation. Poorly executed viral marketing campaigns using social media influencers to promote the products could damage the brand's reputation and drive away potential customers (Mohd Omar et al., 2022). Additionally, when developing viral marketing content for a product or service advertisement, social media influencers may get so focused on promoting the items that they neglect to consider the importance of social responsibility, particularly in regard to ethics and moral principles (Mohd Omar et al., 2022). This is due to the frequent complaints made in the social media comment sections about endorsements and advertisements that occasionally result in unneeded situations and fuel criticism from other social media users.

Using the Source Credibility Model theory, this study illustrates its goals by presenting the Malaysian perspective on the significance and reliability of social media influencers in influencing consumers' propensity to buy goods or services. Additionally, by examining the significance of consumers' perceptions of social media influencers, this study can contribute to the body of knowledge on social media influencer marketing.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Source Credibility Model***

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the Source Credibility Model which refers to the source of information that has been portrayed as reliable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy (Ohanian, 1990). According to Hovland et al. (1953), credible sources have an impact on people's perceptions, decisions, and receptivity. Hovland et al. (1953) were the first researchers

that introduced this model then enhanced by Ohanian (1990), to grasp more about the credibility elements related to influencers. Credibilities such as trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness were included in this model. In addition, a source of respect will also be included in the framework to examine the credibility of social media influencers on consumer purchase intention (Yee Wei et al., 2021).

### ***Consumers' Purchase Intention***

Purchase intention is defined as the future decision of a person when to obtain or buy a product (Ohanian, 1990). This phrase also describes a consumer's attitude when they choose and decide which products to buy at a certain time (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Moreover, Schouten et al. (2020) described purchase intention as the potential for a person to adopt a specific mindset or thoughts while making a decision to buy something. As a result, it has driven the customer's desire to purchase that product or service.

### ***The Credibility of Social Media Influencers***

Chekima et al. (2020) stated that credibility refers to when the source is approved by the receivers as having the required knowledge, skills, and reliability to provide their point of view. Besides, social media influencers represent individuals who have a big social influence in social media and attract or gain followers using entertaining content and posts (Taillon et al., 2020). Enke & Borchers (2019) stated that an influencer also known as a 'content creator' on social media commonly has a large number of followers and their content has the power to influence followers' behaviour especially when the content goes 'viral'.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Source trustworthiness can be described as the perceived honesty, dependability, and reliability (Ohanian, 1990). It can also be explained as the willingness of the influencers to make a genuine statement while creating content (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2021). Consumers are more likely to feel attached to influencers that they see as trustworthy (Schouten et al., 2020).

Trust is the most crucial factor in shaping followers' mindsets (Baig & Shahzad, 2022). This is because when consumers trust the influencers, they will eventually be receptive to the message that the influencers try to convey (Andita et al., 2021). In this case, the more trustworthy the influencers are, the more effective their opinions will be accepted by the viewers (Muda & Hamzah, 2021).

### ***Expertise***

Source expertise is defined as the influencer's knowledge, experience, ability, legitimacy, competence, capabilities, and skills (Ohanian, 1990). Different people will respond differently to opinions and information depending on their perceived level of expertise (Özbölük & Akdoğan, 2022). Baig and Shahzad (2022) stated that influencers who have a well-knowledge can provide genuine information about the product or service which indirectly has a significant impact on their followers' behaviour.

In addition, most customers prefer to consider the influencer's expertise first before making a purchase decision. After all, sources from experts are ultimately more convincing because people believe that the information provided will be more credible and relevant (Muda & Hamzah, 2021).

### ***Attractiveness***

Source attractiveness can be defined as the physical beauty or appearance of the influencer (Ohanian, 1990). Besides, in certain concepts, attractiveness can also be described as characters that are considered pleasant to be seen (Andita et al., 2021). Influencers with stunning physical appeal have a high chance of attracting followers, hence influencing their attitudes and intentions (Weismueller et al., 2020).

In addition, customers often favour attractive people because they interpret a decent image that can make customers more assured to follow their advice (Özbölük & Akdoğan, 2022). Influencers who are viewed as attractive are more likely can encourage people to buy the products. Moreover, in certain industries, beauty and attractiveness continue to be major factors in selecting a good role model (Muda & Hamzah, 2021).

### ***Respect***

Source respect is described as genuine admiration for a person based on personality, achievements, and qualifications (Damabi et al., 2018). Besides, respect can also refer to the social evaluation that affects customer's purchase decisions ((Kurdi et al., 2022). Many celebrities and influencers are portrayed as perfect role models who can inspire the community (Kaushalya & Ranaweera, 2021). Hence, it makes sense that everyone has a few favourable influencers that may subtly impact their purchase intention (Sufian et al., 2021).

Additionally, people will usually respect influencers who have good qualifications because it can help them increase their confidence to buy the products (Chan et al., 2021). Moreover, influencers that have been recognized by the public will have more influential power to convince other people (Lasmana & Gunthoro, 2022).

### ***Hypotheses Development***

#### ***Trustworthiness and Purchase Intention***

People may behave in different ways depending on their level of trust. This is because reliable source information can influence the trust of receivers and hence, convince them to accept the information (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). In addition, today, people show more interest in content provided by social media influencers and as a result, these influencers serve an essential role in spreading information to encourage their followers to purchase the advertised products (Weismueller et al., 2020).

Weismueller et al. (2020) revealed that source trustworthiness has a major influence on customer purchasing intention. Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2020) also highlighted that trustworthiness was the main factor that could influence purchase intention.

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between trustworthiness and consumers' purchase intention.

#### ***Expertise and Purchase Intention***

Expertise represents the capability of a source to give an opinion on a particular topic based on their knowledge or skills. Customers will be more likely to be influenced if the information about the product comes from knowledgeable people. This situation can help more customers to accept the information in a positive way (Chekima et al., 2020). Furthermore, influencers with good ability and knowledge may also have a great impact on customers' attitudes and behaviour (Saima & Khan, 2020).

Chekima et al. (2020) revealed that expertise is one of the strong elements that indirectly influence customers' shopping decisions. Yee Wei et al. (2021) also stated that there is a substantial connection between expertise and customers' purchase intentions.

**H2:** There is a positive relationship between expertise and consumers' purchase intention.

***Attractiveness and Purchase Intention***

Research by Chekima et al. (2020) found that source knowledge together with attractiveness, had a substantial influence on customer purchase intentions. Social media influencers that have a good visual may affect customer perceptions towards the products or services that have been endorsed by them and hence, lead to customers' intention to purchase. Furthermore, advertisements that come from an influencer with an attractive appearance tend to have a good influence on customer behaviour toward the products (AlFarraj et al., 2021). According to the article by AlFarraj et al. (2021), the researchers revealed that source attractiveness had a positive interrelation with purchase behaviour.

**H3:** There is a positive relationship between attractiveness and consumers' purchase intention.

***Respect and Purchase Intention***

Ahmad et al. (2019) stated that respect is a significant component of the influencer's quality. People show respect to someone based on certain characteristics that catch their attention such as personality, skills, and talents (Shimp, 2010). Moreover, due to their respect and fondness towards influencers, people are willing to show their infinite support by buying the advertised products (Yashodhara, 2017).

Numerous earlier research has shown that respected social media influencers can affect customer's purchase intention (Yee Wei et al., 2021). In addition, Ahmad et al. (2019) found that social media influencer endorsements had a favourable effect on consumers' intention to purchase.

**H4:** There is a positive relationship between respect and consumers' purchase intention.

**Conceptual Framework**

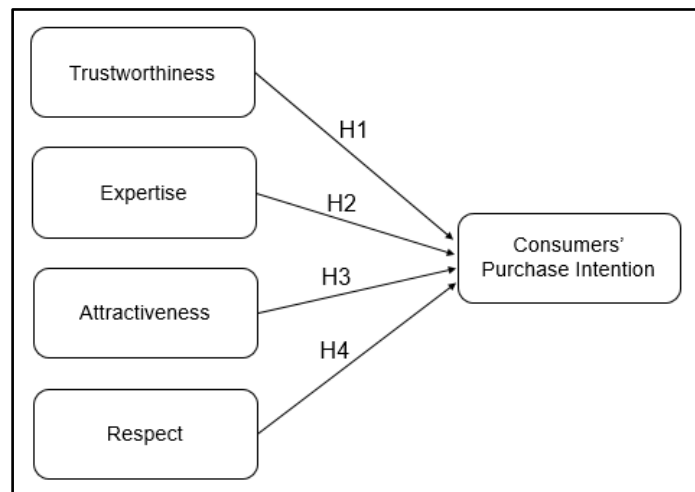


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

**Methodology**

***Population, Sample Size and Instruments***

Instead of employing the entire population for research projects, researchers might select a sample of the population to include in their study. According to Statista (2023), in 2023, Malaysia's active social media users will account for 78.5 percent of the overall population. As a result, this percentage will be chosen as the study's target participant. According to Sekaran & Bougie (2016), the sampling frame is a subgroup of the population, and it allows the researcher to decide the population that will be selected. In this study, the sampling frame that will be used is social media users in Malaysia who are aged between 18 to 34 years old, as this



group recorded a high percentage of social media usage in Malaysia. Furthermore, the non-probability sampling will be applied. According to Turner (2020), non-probability sampling is referred to elements of the population that do not have an equal probability of selection. Convenience sampling may be a simple technique for the researcher to identify participants, depending on the sample size that has been selected for the purpose of the study.

The sample size for this study was determined using G\*Power software. The G\*Power software result shows that the researcher needs to identify a minimum of 129 individuals to answer the questionnaire survey with the effect size (0.15), Alpha (0.05), power (0.95), and a maximum of 4 predictors.

The questionnaires that were changed and adapted from earlier studies served as the basis for the instrument that would be used to gather data for this study. To meet the goals of the study and address the research questions, the questionnaire will be modified accordingly to fulfill the objective of the study. For the questionnaire, it will be categorized into three sections. The first section is related to demographic profile of the respondents. The second section is related to all the independent variables namely trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness and respect. Whilst in the third section provides questions related to consumers' purchase intentions. Furthermore, the validity of the instrument is very important in this research to ensure that the clarity of every item included in the questionnaire is relevant and strong enough to represent the purpose of this study. The instruments will be validated by experts from academics and a person from related industry.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This conceptual paper focuses on the intriguing domain of social media influencer credibility on customers' purchasing intentions, situated within the ever-evolving context of viral marketing. Understanding the complexities of purchase intent is critical in the competitive world of consumer marketplaces. Trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and respect are four fundamental dimensions that can considerably influence consumers' buying intent. Recognizing their individual significance and the potential synergies between them can enable firms to create closer relationships with their customers, ultimately leading to higher buy intent and brand loyalty. Within the realm of influencers, the assessment of credibility is predicated upon the level of trustworthiness that they are able to elicit from their respective following. These individuals who possess a significant online presence, commonly referred to as influencers, are frequently perceived as relatable personalities. As a result, they possess the capacity to establish profound bonds with their audience, hence fostering a sense of trust. Trust has a pivotal role in laying the foundation for subsequent transactions. When customers regard influencers as credible sources of information, they are more motivated to adhere to their recommendations and contemplate engaging in a purchase. The phenomenon of virality serves to enhance the scope and significance of material provided by influencers. When an influencer's endorsement or content achieves viral status, it significantly amplifies brand visibility, leading to increased customer interest and a greater inclination to make a buy. Viral marketing functions as a catalyst, amplifying the impact of reputable social media influencers. Moreover, in the realm of product or service endorsements, influencers who have a deep understanding of the offerings they promote are commonly seen as more trustworthy purveyors of information. Likewise, the cultivation of authenticity in the development of content and the interaction with followers fosters a sense of trust, thereby enhancing the influencer's overall level of credibility. This study concludes with valuable insights into the role of social media influencers and their credibility in influencing the purchase intention of consumers within the context of viral marketing. Source Credibility Model provides a firm framework for understanding how trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and respect influence consumer behaviour. This planned research will have substantial implications for businesses wishing to incorporate

influencer marketing into their marketing strategy. Businesses must select influencers with the desirable traits and characteristics that align with their brand identity and target audience in order to maximise the impact of influencer collaborations. Important factors that can enhance an influencer's ability to persuade consumers include credibility, expertise, physical attractiveness, and regard.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, understanding the dynamics of influencer marketing becomes increasingly important. This Malaysian-centric study will also contribute to the body of knowledge in this field and emphasises the importance of consumers' perceptions of social media influencers. It will provide valuable insights for businesses to refine their influencer marketing strategies and establish more meaningful connections with consumers. In a world where social media platforms are fundamental to people's lives, it is likely that the influence of social media influencers will grow. By recognising the significance of credibility and the factors that contribute to it, businesses can effectively reach and engage their target audiences through influencer marketing, thereby increasing consumer purchase intent and loyalty.

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