

# Social Media Influencer Characteristics and Consumer Purchase Intention: Integrating Source Credibility Theory, Human Brand Theory, and the S-O-R Framework

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media in today's dynamic business environment has triggered the transformation of marketing communication strategies in business sectors, including the cosmetics sector. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the rise of social media influencers into becoming powerful opinion leaders capable of influencing consumers' perceptions and purchase decisions. But there is limited research on influencer characteristics that shape favourable brand perceptions and drive purchase intention particularly in the cosmetics sector in Malaysia. This conceptual study is grounded in the Source Credibility Theory, Human Brand Theory, and Stimulus-Organism-Response model, proposing a new model for explaining the influence of social media influencer characteristics on brand image and brand trust, subsequently leading to purchase intention. The proposed framework contributes to the extant literature on social media marketing by integrating psychological and branding perspectives to better understand the impact of influencer endorsement in the field of consumer behaviour. Managerial implications for local cosmetic brands targeting Generation Z consumers are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Social media influencers, source credibility, human brand theory, S-O-R framework, purchase intention, cosmetics industry

## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has fundamentally reshaped the marketing landscape. Most brands rely on social media influencers to promote their products and to engage consumers through personalised and interactive communication. In today's modern marketing world, influencers as opinion leaders can significantly shape consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and purchase behaviour. A previous study has indicated that the characteristics of social media influencers can significantly affect purchase intention and perceptions (Liang et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with that of Wang et al. (2026) who reported that social media influencers' reviews practically influence consumers' purchase intention during the decision-making process.

This phenomenon has led to the development of a modern marketing approach known as social media influencer (SMI) marketing. Accordingly, Chetioui et al. (2020) highlighted that social media influencers possess substantial persuasive power that can shape their followers' opinion and purchase behaviour. Thus, influencer marketing can boost purchase intention and sales. This finding is consistent with a prior study which indicated that Generation Z consumers are more influenced by social media compared to traditional marketing channels (Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025).

The generation born between 1995 and 2009 grew up in an environment characterised by smartphones and digital connectivity with different expectations towards brands and businesses (Watson Group, 2019). This cohort

accounts for 32% of the global population, estimated at 7.7 billion worldwide. Within this context, 86% of Generation Z engage in the consumption of cosmetics products and 70% purchase such products at a higher rate compared to other generations (Watson Group, 2019).

As of 2025, Malaysia's Generation Z population is estimated at approximately 7.7 million with a combined monthly disposable income of USD327 million, highlighting a growth potential for the cosmetics industry (Phung, 2025). This industry, in particular, has experienced rapid growth due to the increasing influence of digital marketing and social media engagement. As such, many cosmetics brands collaborate with social media influencers to produce makeover-related content targeting Generation Z consumers who often rely on influencer recommendations before making purchase decisions. Likewise, the said generation's spending on cosmetic brands has contributed significantly to the growth of the cosmetics industry; therefore, this segment is regarded as a key consumer group within the industry.

Despite the widespread adoption of influencer marketing strategies, there remains limited understanding of how influencer characteristics shape consumer perceptions of brands and ultimately their purchase intention, particularly in Malaysia. While previous studies have examined factors such as credibility, trustworthiness, and attractiveness in direct relationships, there is still a need to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains the psychological mechanisms underlying influencer-driven consumer behaviour through the mediation roles of human brand trust and human brand image.

Therefore, this study leverages the Source Credibility Theory, Human Brand Theory, and Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory to propose a comprehensive model for examining the social media characteristics that influence consumer purchase intention through brand related perceptions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Cosmetics Industry in Malaysia

The cosmetics industry in Malaysia has experienced significant growth in recent years. This is due to rising consumer awareness about personal grooming, increased disposable income, and the rapid expansion of digital platforms. In Malaysia, the beauty and personal care market is projected to amass revenues of USD 3.2 billion with an annual growth rate of 2.5% (International Trade Administration, 2024). In addition, online sales are expected to contribute approximately 18% of the total market revenue, indicating the growing importance of digital platforms in the cosmetics industry.

In line with this, the rapid growth of cosmetics and skincare segments is largely due to a generational shift as younger consumers increasingly enter the market. Moreover, the expansion of social media channels, global beauty trends, and the rise of e-commerce also facilitated this growth (International Trade Administration, 2024). Collaboration between cosmetic brands and social media influencers through the production of makeover tutorial contents effectively stimulate consumers' attention and influence their purchase decisions.

Major international brands have established a strong presence in Malaysia. In 2023, the market value of premium cosmetics and fragrances exceeded USD 343 million. Most beauty products in Malaysia are imported from Singapore, the United States, Japan, Europe, and most prominently South Korea, driven by the growing influence of K-pop and K-Dramas (International Trade Administration, 2024).

At the same time, several premium local brands are also gaining market acceptance, indicating the competitiveness and maturity of the domestic beauty market. Among the most prominent local cosmetics brands are Syed Dewa, Simplysiti, Alha Alfa, and Elianto, among others. Meanwhile, the growing emphasis on halal cosmetics supported by strict certification standards from the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) enhances Muslim consumers' trust and product credibility, catering to the need of Malaysia's predominantly Muslim population. In addition, all beauty and personal care products are regulated by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA) which operates under the Ministry of Health Malaysia to ensure compliance with the industry's safety and quality regulations (International Trade Administration, 2024).

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## Social Media Influencers in Digital Marketing

Social media influencers are individuals who have established credibility and a substantial following on social media platforms and are capable of influencing their audience's attitudes and behaviours. Influencers typically produce content related to specific topics such as beauty, fashion, lifestyle, or technology and are often perceived as relatable and trustworthy sources of information.

In the cosmetics industry, influencers frequently demonstrate product usage, share reviews, and provide tutorials, which helps consumers evaluate product quality and performance. These interactions create a form of electronic word-of-mouth communication that significantly shapes consumer purchase decisions.

Social media influencer marketing has become an essential strategy in shaping consumer purchase intention in the digital economy. Influencers act as opinion leaders who bridge the gap between brands and consumers through interactive and engaging content. According to Al Kurdi et al. (2022), influencers significantly influence consumers' attitudes and intentions toward product purchases by leveraging their presence on social media platforms. This growing influence is further supported by Ao et al. (2023) whose meta-analysis confirms that social media influencers have a strong positive impact on both customer engagement and purchase intention across various industries and platforms.

A key area of research focuses on the characteristics or attributes of influencers that drive consumer responses. Al Kurdi et al. (2022) identified several important dimensions, including source credibility, attractiveness, communication, relatability, and respect. Similarly, Masuda et al. (2022) highlighted that influencer attributes such as trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness significantly affect purchase intention. Their study further explains that these attributes shape how consumers perceive influencers' personalities, which in turn influences their behavioural intentions. This suggests that influencer effectiveness is not merely about popularity but also about how their personal traits resonate with the audience.

In addition to direct effects, several studies emphasised the importance of mediating mechanisms in explaining how influencer characteristics influence purchase intention. Al Kurdi et al. (2022) demonstrated that consumer attitude plays a mediating role between influencer characteristics and purchase intention. Likewise, Masuda et al. (2022) showed that characterisations—how consumers interpret influencer personalities—mediate this relationship. These findings indicate that influencer marketing operates through psychological processes, where consumers form perceptions and attitudes before making purchase decisions. Therefore, understanding these mediating factors is crucial for developing effective marketing strategies.

Recent research has also expanded the discussion by incorporating broader outcomes such as customer engagement and consumer well-being. Ao et al. (2023) highlighted that influencers enhance customer engagement, which subsequently strengthens purchase intention. Meanwhile, Jamil et al. (2024) provided a TikTok-based perspective, demonstrating that influencers not only affect purchase intention but also influence consumers' well-being, including emotional satisfaction and perceived social connection. This suggests that influencer marketing extends beyond transactional outcomes and contributes to consumers' overall experience and psychological state.

Furthermore, the literature continues to evolve with comprehensive reviews and future research directions. Sardar and Vijay (2025) emphasised that while existing studies confirm the positive role of influencers in shaping purchase intention, there is a need for more research on emerging platforms, cultural contexts, and ethical considerations. They proposed a research agenda focusing on transparency, authenticity, and long-term consumer trust. Overall, the literature consistently supports the significant role of social media influencer characteristics in influencing consumer purchase intention, while also highlighting the complexity of underlying mechanisms and the need for further exploration in this rapidly changing field.

## Source Credibility Theory

This theory has been one of the most prominent theories in the field of consumer behaviour. It suggests that the persuasiveness of a message largely depends on the perceived credibility of the communicator (Hovland &

Weiss, 1952; Ohanian, 1990). As such, the endorser acts as a credible source of information, effectively stimulating purchase decisions (Bogoevska-Gavrilova & Ciunova-Shuleska, 2022; Ohanian, 1990). This is due to consumers' perceptions that influencer marketing is more credible than direct seller communications and engagement to create purchase intention (Barari et al., 2025). The theory identifies several key attributes of credibility including expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953) as well as attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990).

In the context of influencer marketing, these characteristics enhance the persuasive power of influencer endorsements, leading consumers to develop favourable attitudes toward promoted brands. Previous empirical studies have confirmed that attractiveness of influencer marketing is one of the key drivers in consumers' purchase intention (Bogoevska-Gavrilova & Ciunova-Shuleska, 2022). Apart from that, the expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness of influencer marketing also significantly impact positive brand attitude (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Tang et al., 2025).

### Human Brand Theory

The Human Brand Theory proposes that individuals, including celebrities, politicians and influencers, can function as brands themselves. Influencers cultivate personal identities that followers perceive as authentic and relatable. As a result, their personal brand attributes can transfer to the products they endorse. According to Ki et al. (2020) and Thomson (2006), a media persona can evolve into a human brand who fosters emotional attachment and generate positive marketing outcomes in purchase decisions. This theory distinguishes a media persona's name, identity, and other qualities from traditional brand elements such as brand name, symbols, or other features that serve to identify a brand (Thomson, 2006).

From a literature perspective, previous studies have examined the role of marketing influencers as human brands among their followers that demonstrate emotional attachment between consumers and influencers (Ki et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). In addition, influencer marketing serves as a source that fulfils consumers' intrinsic needs such as self-expression, identity formation, and social belonging (Malik et al., 2023).

### Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory

This theory explains how environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal states, which subsequently lead to behavioural responses. Within the context of influencer marketing, the characteristics of influencer marketing such as attractiveness, authenticity, and expertise serve as stimuli that influence organismic states such as brand trust and brand image, and subsequently lead to attitudinal and behavioural responses such as purchase intention. This framework provides a structured approach for understanding how influencer characteristics affect consumer behaviour through psychological processes. Past studies have applied this theory within the context of influencer marketing social media users (Abdul Rahman et al., 2025).

The proposed conceptual framework is illustrated as follows:

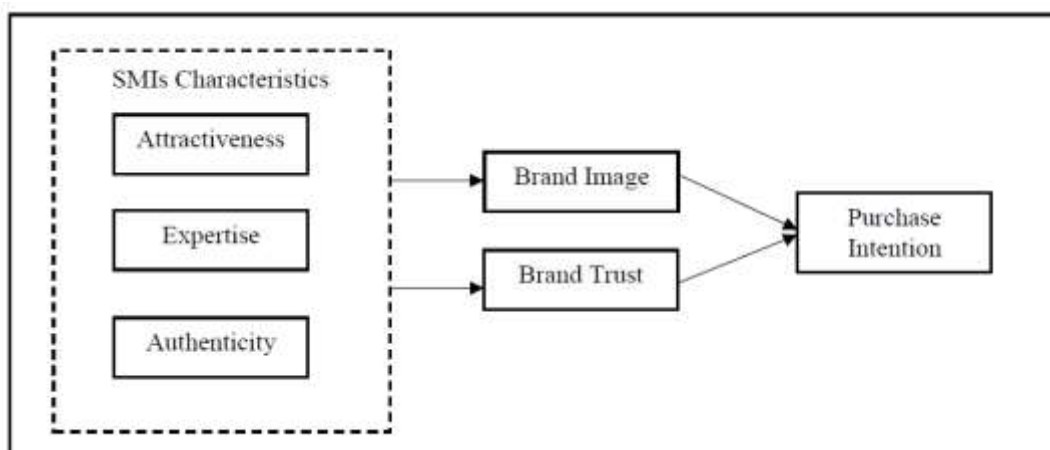


Figure 1. Proposed framework

## METHODOLOGY

The proposed model suggests that influencer characteristics act as stimuli that influence consumers' perceptions of brands. These perceptions subsequently influence consumers' behavioural intentions. Specifically, this study aims to examine the relationships between influencer marketing characteristics which influence brand image and brand trust and finally stimulate purchase intention.

This study adopts a positivist research paradigm as it emphasises objective measurement and empirical testing of relationship among variables. The study employs a cross-sectional time horizon. A quantitative research design will be utilised with data collected through an online survey targeting 400 respondents.

A structured questionnaire will be administered to Generation Z consumers in Malaysia to examine their perceptions on cosmetics brands. This study will employ a purposive sampling method using an online survey approach. Later, the collected data will be analysed using statistical techniques including SPSS for descriptive analysis and PLS-SEM using SmartPLS for structural equation modelling, enabling the assessment of path coefficients and regression relationships within the proposed model.

## Managerial Implications

The proposed model offers several important implications for marketing practitioners. First, cosmetic brands should carefully select influencer marketing whose characteristics align with brand values and target audience expectations. Influencers perceived as credible, knowledgeable, and authentic are more likely to enhance brand perceptions and stimulate purchase intentions.

Second, marketers should focus on developing long-term partnerships with influencers to build consistent brand narratives that strengthen brand trust and reputation. Authentic engagement with audiences is critical in building sustainable relationships between brands and consumers.

## CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper proposes a theoretical framework that explains the influence of social media influencer characteristics on consumer purchase intention through brand perceptions. By integrating the Source Credibility Theory, Human Brand Theory, and S-O-R framework, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying influencer marketing effectiveness.

Future empirical research can test the proposed model using quantitative methods such as PLS-SEM to validate the relationships between influencer characteristics, brand perceptions, and consumer purchase intention in the cosmetics industry.

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