Effectiveness of social media influencers and their impact on customers' attitudes and buying intention

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Hadeel Elmousa*, Wong Foong Yee and Jun-Hwa Cheah

School of Business and Economics,
University Putra Malaysia,
Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: hadeel.sawaa@gmail.com
Email: fywong@upm.edu.my
Email: jackycheahjh@gmail.com
*Corresponding author

Abstract: This research aims to bridge the industry and literature gaps by corroborating the impact of social media influencers on consumer attitudes and intentions towards promotions. A total of 350 responses were acquired through the purposive sampling method. The selected approach for testing the hypotheses was partial least squares (PLS). The observations corroborated the model by substantiating that source credibility, subjective norms, and meaning transfer were significantly related to attitude. Furthermore, source credibility, attitude, and subjective norms were significantly related to buying intention. From various contexts, this study contributes to the marketing literature and sector. First, this work employed the theory of reasoned action from the psychology domain to demonstrate the association between behaviour and attitude in human activities, which is presently being extended to an influencer marketing situation in Malaysia. Second, the outcomes of this research can offer profound insights and guiding principles for firms, marketing agencies, marketers, and influencers.

Keywords: social media influencers; SMIs; influencer marketing; attitude; purchase intention; subjective norms; partial least square; PLS.

Biographical notes: Hadeel Elmousa is a Master's graduate from the School of Business and Economics, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), as well as a freelance researcher in the field of business and marketing. Her areas of interest include consumer behaviour, quantitative research, marketing communications and entrepreneurship.

Wong Foong Yee is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Business and Economics, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She teaches Marketing, Consumer Behaviour and Strategic Management at the university. Her research interests are in the areas of consumer behaviour, farm management and marketing strategy. She has written numerous journal articles, cases, subject modules, books, as well as book chapters in local and international publications.

Jun-Hwa Cheah (Jacky) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Business and Economics, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) as well as external member of relationship marketing for impact cluster at Griffith University. His areas of interest include consumer behaviour, quantitative research and methodological issues. His publications appear in journals such as *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, *Asia Pacific Journal Marketing and Logistics*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Total Quality Management and Business Excellent*, *Internet Research*, *Information Systems Management*, *Industrial Management and Data Systems*, *Tourism Management*, *Tourism Economics*, and *International Journal of Hospitality and Contemporary Management*.

1 Introduction

Social media is steadily expanding its presence across all aspects of our lives. Today, people are more subconsciously and behaviourally involved with Google+, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, and other major social media networks (Alalwan, 2018). With internet technology advancing regularly, social media has now become a vital means of communication in the twenty-first century, functioning as a crucial source of information and ideas. This interconnection has not just affected the social relationships and exchanges of people but also offered a challenge to the traditional business-to-consumer communication pattern (Bartoloni et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2014). Due to the swift flow of the content produced through social media, network participants are required to vie for the highest attention and the consequent impact on the information users (Arora et al., 2019). The human craving for socialising has been underlined by the growth of social media. This scenario indicates that companies view social media as a vital constituent of their digital marketing tactics (Dann, 2010). As per Alalwan (2018), consumers who see social media promotions as useful and helpful are more inclined towards purchasing the targeted items stated in these endorsements. With around 50% of Malaysians buying products after visiting social media portals, this media continues to be a crucial element of internet-based buying decisions (Malaysian Online Shoppers' Profiles, 2019). Malaysia is an appealing place in Southeast Asia for social media promotions due to its stable economy and advanced digital technology environment. As per Malaysian Online Shoppers' Profiles (2019), 88% of Malaysian consumers look online when intending to buy something; notably, 75% of Malaysian consumers have already bought using the internet.

Influencer marketing has evolved into a critical element of social media promotions for connecting with customers in a direct manner (Duh and Thabethe, 2021). In 2020, about 70% of vendors utilised influencers for promoting content and advertising products. Social media influencers (SMIs) are certainly aiding brands in connecting with their consumers (Landers, 2020). It is projected that brands would spend around 15 billion US dollars by 2022 on influencer marketing (Brooks, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). The ability to influence can help understand the development and pattern of consumers' behaviour and attitudes (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

SMIs are able to impact the buying intentions of customers effectively (Duh and Thabethe, 2021; Lim et al., 2017). As per Influencer Marketing in Malaysia (2020),

around 70% of YouTube users believe in the viewpoints expressed by influencers, and 71% of consumers are more likely to buy on the basis of a reference from social media. Nonetheless, knowledge and research regarding the efficacy of promotions by SMIs are yet to be uncovered (Acikgoz and Burnaz, 2021; Godey, 2016). Prior research works have offered insights into the efficiency of promotions through celebrity endorsements (Kumar and Kumar, 2015; Paul and Bhakar, 2018). Few of the research works emphasised on social media promotions within the domain of advertising (Alalwan, 2018; Kamboj et al., 2018). Furthermore, few of the earlier research works sought to determine the aspects which steer the success of Internet-based brand engagement using SMIs (Hughes et al., 2019; Phua et al., 2018). Few of the research works offered insights regarding customers' intent to buy on the basis of the products promoted (Abreu, 2019; Wei and Li, 2013). The previous studies have exhibited the importance of understanding marketing and its impact on consumers. Notably, research regarding influencer marketing is inadequate (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), especially in Malaysia.

Furthermore, prior research works studied the efficacy of endorsers by utilising various variables like brand attitude (Wang et al., 2019), image congruence (Paul and Bhakar, 2018), perceived value (Chen and Lin, 2019), and attractiveness (Hani et al., 2018). Nonetheless, only a few studied the efficacy of subjective norms on Malaysian customers. Hence, more studies are required to consider subjective norms in the efficiency of the influencer marketing perspective.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 The TRA

As per this theory, a personal aspect and a social aspect impact the intention to carry out a specific behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). As per theory of reasoned action (TRA), an attitude concerning the behaviour signifies the personal aspect. Conversely, the social aspect is outlined by the subjective norms with respect to a customer's behaviour as ascertained by the customer's behavioural intention, wherein the behavioural intention is a result of attitude concerning the subjective norms as well as behaviour. As the objective is to emphasise on influencers' effect on consumers' intention to buy, the culture concerning social and attitudinal variables would considerably impact espousal as Malaysia represents a collectivist ethos (Ramayah et al., 2009).

2.2 Source credibility

This theory elucidates how the targeted audience identifies sources of knowledge and proficiency when subjected to products or services (Ohanian, 1990; Teng et al., 2014). Expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are the three key notions which comprise source credibility (Ohanian, 1990). If consumers see the promotions of products and services as precise and legitimate on social media networks, they will espouse a positive attitude towards the suggested product or service (Spry et al., 2011). If they view the suggested offering as worthless and untrue, they will unfavourably relate the promoted products or services with the endorser and generate an unfavourable attitude (Cheung et al., 2009).

2.3 The effectiveness of SMIs

2.3.1 Credibility

Expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are the three key constituents of source credibility, which play a key part in social and informational influence (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001). Perceived credibility is regarded one of the most vital aspects when individuals or marketers follow or choose influencers (Chetioui et al., 2020). From the advertising perspective, source credibility is typically related to an endorser (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Ohanian, 1990). Hence, it is related to SMIs. Furthermore, prior research works have discussed that the perceived credibility of the endorser was a vital forecaster of consumers' attitudes and buying intentions (Astuti and Risqiani, 2020; Chetioui et al., 2020; Chin et al., 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Ku et al., 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Pick, 2021; Serman and Sims, 2020; Supotthamjaree and Srinaruewan, 2021). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H1 There is a positive relationship between the source credibility of endorsers and the buying intention of consumers.

H2 There is a positive relationship between the source credibility of endorsers and the attitude of consumers.

2.3.2 Meaning transfer

Few of the research works have noted a favourable effect of meaning transfer on consumers' buying intention (Araigy, 2018; Jain and Roy, 2016; Lim et al., 2017). Consumers exhibit a tendency to buy items recommended by their revered endorsers (Fowles, 1996). By means of meaning transfer, there is a significant positive relationship between consumers' buying intention and the endorsed brands (McCracken, 1989). Prior research works have demonstrated that meaning transfer exhibited an impact on customers' attitudes as well as buying intentions (Astuti and Risqiani, 2020; Czarnecka et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2017; McCracken, 1989; Peetz et al., 2004; Roy and Jain, 2017). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H3 A positive relationship exists between meaning transfer and consumers' buying intention.

H4 A positive relationship exists between meaning transfer and consumers' attitudes.

2.3.3 Subjective norms

Several research works have noted that subjective norm exhibits a favourable, direct relationship with behavioural intention (Abramson et al., 2015; Charles, 2018; Park, 2009; Ramayah et al., 2009; Sun and Wang, 2019; Teo, 2012). Furthermore, prior works have proved that a significant causal association exists between subjective norms and attitudes (Chetioui et al., 2020; Dalila et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2004; Mangafić et al., 2017; Peña-García et al., 2020; Serman and Sims, 2020; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005). All these research works deployed subjective norms and approaches from different perspectives (Chang, 1998; Chetioui et al., 2020; Dalila et al., 2020; Mangafić et al., 2017; Peña-García et al., 2020). The researchers demonstrated a causal association

between subjective norms and attitudes towards behaviour, and it was noteworthy. Hence, it is hypothesised that:

H5 A positive relationship exists between subjective norms and consumers' buying intention.

H6 A positive relationship exists between subjective norms and consumers' attitude.

2.3.4 Attitude

According to Laroche et al. (1996), endorsers may impact choices of customers, thereby generating a sense of readiness to buy. Actions of individuals are methodically related to their attitudes when the nature of the interpreters of attitude and behavioural norms is taken into account (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977). According to the TRA, attitude pertains to a psychological inclination to generate an assessment against or favouring a particular object to a certain degree, and that behaviour is related to a person's attitude (Wang et al., 2019). Prior research works have observed that marketing activities on social networking portals can enhance the attitudes of customers, and the generated attitude can project buying intention (Astuti and Risqiani, 2020; Chetioui et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017; Pick, 2021; Serman and Sims, 2020; Wang and Chou, 2021). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H7 Attitude has a positive impact on buying intention.

2.3.5 Consumer attitude as a mediator

Source credibility has been seen to enhance the attitude of customers (Brinol et al., 2004), thereby driving an increase in product buying intention (Harmon and Coney, 1982). Prior research works deployed attitude as an intermediary between source credibility and buying intention (Astuti and Risqiani, 2020; Chin et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2017; Mangafić et al., 2017; Pick, 2020; Serman and Sims, 2020). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H8 Attitude mediates the relationship between source credibility and buying intention.

As per Schimmelpfennig and Hunt (2020), consumers see products as assortments of meanings which endorse who they are; consequently, promotional endeavours focused on meaning transfer trigger an identification process wherein consumers try to cultivate or uphold the identity of the influencer. The buying intention of consumers can be fostered if they are continually inculcated with a favourable attitude to the endorsement's conveyed meaning (Astuti and Risqiani, 2020; Lim et al., 2017; Thwaites et al., 2012). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H9 Attitude mediates the relationship between meaning transfer and buying intention.

Ajzen (1991) and Armitage and Conner (2001) noted the positive relationship between the attitude and subjective norms of the endorser, besides a positive relationship between the endorser's buying intention and subjective norms. If consumers sincerely think that SMIs are crucial to them, they will be more inclined to buy the suggested product. (Mangafić et al., 2017; Serman and Sims, 2020; Wang and Chou, 2021) observed a mediation impact between attitude and the association between subjective norms and buying intention. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H10   Attitude mediates the relationship between subjective norms and buying intention.

Table 1 Terms' definitions

Source credibility (CR)	CR refers to the consumer perception about the source of information based on attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise in the area of the endorsed products.	Ohanian (1990)
Attitude (ATT)	The term 'attitude' relates to an individual's overall assessment of how well he or she performs the behaviour.	Ajzen (1991)
Meaning transfer (MT)	The cultural meaning of the endorser and the transmission of that meaning is what determines endorsement results.	McCracken (1989)
Subjective norm (SN)	The individual's perception of social pressure from the surrounding environment over whether or not to engage in a behaviour.	Ajzen (1991)
Purchase intention (PI)	'PI' term refers to the likelihood that a person will buy a particular product based on the interaction of the customer's attitude, needs, and perception of the product.	Beneke et al. (2016)

According to the literature, Figure 1 shows the study model, which explains the effectiveness of SMIs on customer attitudes and purchase intention. The effect of the SMIs' endorsement on attitudes and intention to buy those endorsed products.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework (see online version for colours)
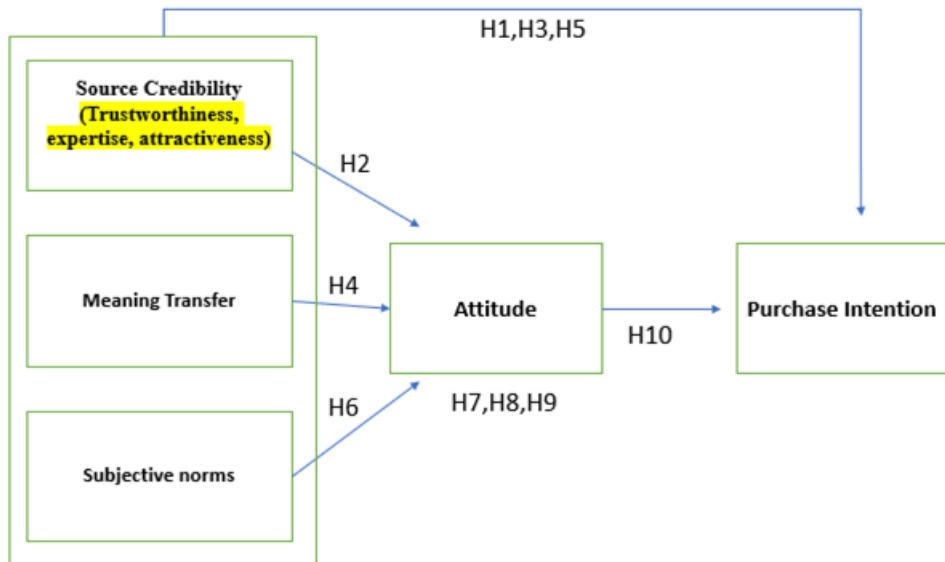
3   Methodology

3.1   Data collection and sample

A web-based questionnaire was prepared and distributed on social media portals. The survey comprised two filter questions. The first question was whether the respondent held a social media account, and the second was whether the respondent was following any social media influencer. In case the respondents answered 'no' to any of these filter questions, the survey will end there itself.

This research espoused a non-probability sampling approach as the necessary sampling structure for respondents was unavailable. The objective of this research is to gauge the theory's generalisability and not generalise it to a populace. Because of the unreachability of the sample structure of social media consumers who followed influencers, this research utilised the judgmental sampling approach, which was termed acceptable in a scenario where just a tiny group of persons attained the essential information. The questionnaire was circulated online through personal networks, and the dissemination of survey links was done on multiple social media portals (e.g., Instagram and Facebook) which were considered thematically most appropriate for the study setting. Respondents were chosen from their comments on the social media pages of the influencers.

The questionnaire for the research was developed on the basis of the above hypothesis. Respondents were those who followed SMIs on social media and stayed in Malaysia. The G*Power 3 software by Faul et al. (2007) was utilised for calculating the sample size. The results showed that the minimum sample size which should be taken into account is 204. The objective of this study is to reduce errors in the course of the finalisation of the questionnaires to decrease missing values, inconsistent answers, and omissions. A total of 350 questionnaires were consequently sent to the respondents.

Figure 2   Age group distribution of internet users (see online version for colours)
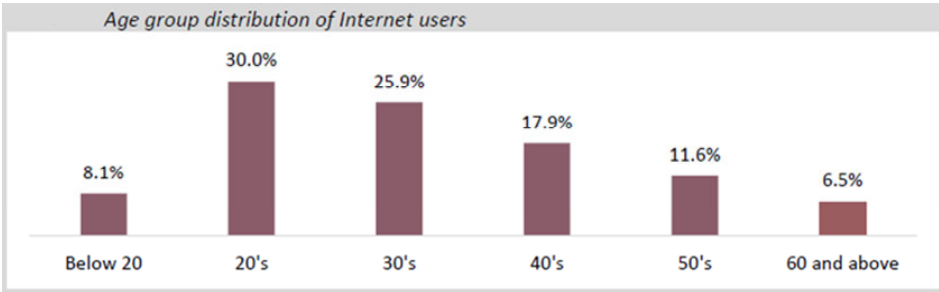
Source: Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (2018)

This work's demographic age range was 20 to 50 years so as to concentrate on the age groups that are the most engaged on social media networks and are monetarily independent. For analysing the data, the actual sample scope was 313. This research targeted social media consumers in Malaysia who follow social media influencers on social media portals. As of January 2020, about 81% of the Malaysian populace was active on social media (Müller, 2020). The most active users of the internet were adults in

their 20s, 30s, and 40s, accounting for 30.0%, 25.9%, and 17.9% share, respectively (Figure 2) (Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018).

Moreover, around 70.4% of internet users are employed (including self-employed), followed by full-time pupils at 12.1% (Figure 3) (Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018). On the basis of the statistics mentioned, the chosen age of the populace for this research will vary from 20–50 years of age to involve the most active age groups consuming social media who are also monetarily independent.

Figure 3 Percentage distribution of internet users by employment status (see online version for colours)

Percentage distribution of Internet users by employment status
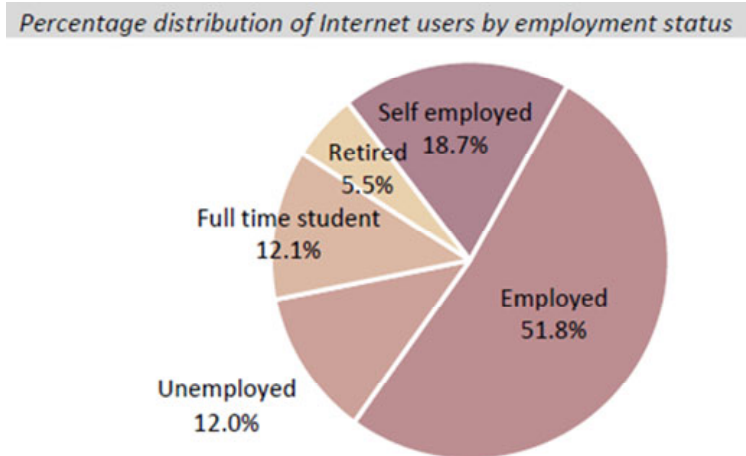
Source: Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (2018)

To summarise, the criterion chosen for selecting the respondents consisted of:

1   They must be in Malaysia.

2   Social media users.

3   Following at least one social media influencer.

4   Age between 20–50.

The purpose of these criteria for the respondents is the guarantee to provide data relevant to the study.

In terms of content validity, the primary model in this study was constructed using relevant constructs from previous literature. The questionnaire's questions were designed using the literature and pre-validation scales and modified to suit this study. Table 2 describes the demographics of respondents of this study.

3.2   Measures

This study used variables generated from previous literature. The study adopted five constructs to measure the effectiveness of SMIs' endorsements. The constructs are source credibility (Muda et al., 2014) which is considered a formative construct, meaning transfer (Lim et al., 2017) is considered a reflective construct, subjective norms

(Peña-García et al., 2020) is considered a reflective construct, attitude (Lim et al., 2017) is considered a reflective construct, and purchase intention (Lim et al., 2017) is considered a reflective construct. Five Likert scales for independent variables and seven Likert scales for the mediating and dependent variables were used to assess the respondents' answers to the questions in varying degrees of intensity. Table 3 illustrates the constructs of this study with the measurement items and the composite reliability value to assure that all constructs exhibited a sufficient composite reliability.

Table 2   Distribution of respondents profiling (n = 313)

Demographic profile		Frequency	Percent %
Age	20–30	166	53.00
	31–40	106	33.90
	41–50	41	13.10
Gender	Male	127	40.60
	Female	186	59.40
Education	SPM/STPM or lower	14	4.50
	Diploma	18	5.80
	Bachelor	126	40.30
	Master	85	27.20
	PhD	66	21.10
	Professional qualifications	4	1.30
#	Total	313	100

Table 3   Measurement table

Latent variable	Number of items	Composite reliabilities	AVE	Source
Source credibility		0.89	0.73	Muda et al. (2014)
Credibility attractiveness	Attractiveness			
	1 Attractive social media influencers can trigger my purchase of the endorsed products.			
	2 Classy social media influencers can trigger my purchase of the endorsed products.			
	3 Beautiful social media influencers can trigger my purchase of the endorsed products.			
	4 Elegant social media influencers can trigger my purchase of the endorsed products.			
	5 Sexy social media influencers can trigger my purchase of the endorsed products			

Table 3 Measurement table (continued)

Latent variable	Number of items	Composite reliabilities	AVE	Source
Credibility expertise	Expertise			
	6 An expert social media influencer can influence my purchase intention.			
	7 An experienced social media influencer can influence my purchase intention			
	8 A knowledgeable social media influencer can influence my purchase intention			
	9 A qualified social media influencer can influence my purchase intention.			
	10 A skilled social media influencer can influence my purchase intention.			
Credibility trustworthiness	Trustworthiness			
	11 The dependability of a social media influencer can trigger my purchase intention			
	12 The honesty of a social media influencer can influence my purchase intention			
	13 The reliability of a social media influencer can influence my purchase intention.			
	14 The sincerity of a social media influencer can influence my purchase intention			
	15 The trustworthiness of a social media influencer can influence my purchase intention.			
Meaning transfer		0.898	0.746	Lim et al. (2017)
	1 The meanings attributed by social media influencers will influence my purchase intention.			
	2 I believe that there is a consistent transfer between the social media influencer and the product endorsed.			
	3 The attribute of social media influencers will influence the image of a product endorsed.			

Table 3   Measurement table (continued)

Latin variable		Composite reliabilities	Number of items	AVE	Source
Subjective Norms			0.949	0.788	Peña-García et al. (2020)
	1	The social media influencers who are important to me believe I should buy the endorsed products.			
	2	The social media influencers who influence me think I should buy the endorsed products.			
	3	The social media influencers whose opinions are valuable for me would rather I buy the endorsed products.			
Consumer attitude			0.94	0.788	Lim et al. (2017)
	1	Believe that using social media influencers in an advertisement will be able to convince the customers.			
	2	I think using social media influencers will help me to know the product better.			
	3	I believe social media influencer will be able to persuade me to try the product			
	4	Social media influencer advertisement is more convincing for me to buy a product than an advertisement endorsed by others.			
	5	The advertisement with a social media influencer is more promising and triggers my purchase intention.			
Purchase intention			0.960	0.858	Lim et al. (2017)
	1	I am likely to purchase products or services that have been endorsed by the social media influencer			
	2	Social media influencer increases the value of products endorsed.			
	3	I am encouraged to buy products that are advertised by social media influencers.			
	4	There is a high probability I would purchase the product after watching the advertisement endorsed by a social media influencer			

4   Data analysis

The data analysis stage was performed in two stages. First, reliability and validity analyses were made using partial least squares (PLS) analysis. Second, verifying the path coefficients and explanatory power of the model. This study investigated the causal relationship between source credibility, meaning transfer, subjective norms, attitude, and purchase intention. In previous literature, however, each construct had multiple measurement items, and the model of this study has a mediator. As a result, PLS was more appropriate for this study than other SEM analytic methods for investigating the causal relationship between variables, reducing measurement errors, and avoiding collinearity. The SmartPLS was employed in this investigation (Version 3.2.7) developed by Henseler et al. (2015).

4.1   Common method variance

CMV was performed using the single factor approach (Jarvis et al., 2003) by including all measuring items in factor analysis. The first component explains 27.56% of the variation, which is less than the 40% cut-off (Hair et al., 2017), proving that in this batch of data, common technique bias is not substantial.

Table 4   The reflective measurement model's assessment

Construct	Indicator	Outer loadings	Cronbach alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Attitude	ATT1	0.724	0.886	0.917	0.69
	ATT2	0.808			
	ATT3	0.863			
	ATT4	0.852			
	ATT5	0.894			
Meaning transfer	MT1	0.826	0.775	0.866	0.683
	MT2	0.825			
	MT3	0.828			
Purchase intention	PI1	0.922	0.923	0.951	0.867
	PI2	0.787			
	PI3	0.941			
	PI4	0.930			
Subjective norms	SN1	0.858	0.854	0.912	0.775
	SN2	0.910			
	SN3	0.872			

4.2   Outer model and scale validation

The first criterion is typically internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alpha was traditionally used to measure reliability based on the indicator's inter-correlations. Ursachi et al. (2015) claimed that Cronbach alpha of 0.6–0.7 demonstrates a sufficient level of reliability, and for an outstanding level, it should be 0.8 or greater. Table 4 shows

that the composite reliability for all variables exceeded the minimal requirement of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010). Following that, the outer loading of the indicators and the average variance extracted was calculated to assess the convergent validity of the reflective constructs (Hair et al., 2017). All reflective construct loadings surpassed the acceptable amount of 0.70. Thus, they were retained. Table 4 presents that the AVE values for all of the reflective constructs were more than 0.5, indicating that all of the items were loaded on the relevant constructs and explained more than 50% of the variations (Hair et al., 2010). To conclude, all of the variables used in this study successfully fulfil the criterion for reliability and convergent validity.

4.3   Discriminant validity

Assessment of reflective items was followed by discriminant validity analysis. Using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria, all of the elements in the model should load more significantly on their own constructs. Table 5 demonstrated that all reflective variables had enough discriminant validity since the square root of AVE (diagonal) was greater than the correlations (off-diagonal) for all reflective items.

Table 5   Discriminant validity

	Attitude	*Meaning transfer*	*Purchase intention*	*Subjective norms*
Attitude	0.830			
Meaning transfer	0.644	0.826		
Purchase intention	0.813	0.584	0.931	
Subjective norms	0.625	0.643	0.648	0.880

Source: Fornell and Lacker (1981)

Table 6   Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion to assess the discriminant validity

	Attitude	*Meaning transfer*	*Purchase intention*	*Subjective norms*
Attitude				
Meaning transfer	0.783			
Purchase intention	0.89	0.681		
Subjective norms	0.715	0.786	0.728	

Source: Henseler et al. (2015)

To further confirm the results, Henseler et al. (2015) approach was used to assess the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) of the correlations. According to Table 6, all results were less than the HTMT limit of 0.90 (Gold et al., 2001) except for one item (PI2), the HTMT was above 0.90. Therefore, the item was deleted to increase the HTMT value for purchase intention. Consequently, both findings show that all constructs had appropriate discriminant validity (Table 6).

4.4   Second-order formative construct assessment

According to Chin (1998), convergent validity is tested to assess the formative measures using the redundancy analysis. Sarstedt et al. (2013) proposed that formative measures that provide a path coefficient with global items larger than 0.70 are considered to have adequate amounts of convergent validity. As illustrated in Table 7, the redundancy analyses of the formative construct source credibility show a path coefficient of 0.787. Thus, convergent validity is sufficient for the formative items in this study.

Table 7   Formative variables measurement properties

HOC construct		LOC dimension	Convergent validity	Weights	VIF	t-value	Sig.
Source credibility	1	Expertise	0.787	0.505	2.260	4.972	0.000
	2	Trustworthiness		0.247	2.064	2.767	0.006
	3	Attractiveness		0.435	1.368	5.987	0.000

In this study, source credibility is a reflective-formative higher-order construct (HOC) which is made up of three lower-order components (LOCs), (i.e., expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness). Table 7 represents the assessment of the formative second-order construct. The variance inflation factor (VIF) results for each formative item are less than 3.33 (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2006). This result revealed that all these three aspects of source credibility are distinct, and they measure different aspects of source credibility. Furthermore, significance and relevance of the outer weights indicates that expertise (t-value = 4.972; p-value = 0.000), trustworthiness (t-value = 2.767; p-value = 0.000) and attractiveness (t-value = 5.987; p-value = 0.000) are significant.

4.5   Assessment of structural model for collinearity issues

Table 8 displays the results for the lateral collinearity test, whereby all the predictors of purchase intention and attitude have a VIF value less than the 3.33 threshold (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2006). Hereafter, it can be decided that lateral collinearity issues are not substantial in this model.

Table 8   Assessment of lateral collinearity issues

Construct	Variance inflation factors (VIF)	
	Attitude	Purchase intention
Attitude		2.174
Source credibility	2.080	2.318
Meaning transfer	2.129	2.273
Subjective norms	1.949	2.085

Note: VIF < 3.33; Constructs are tested on the dependent variable of purchase intention and the mediator attitude.

4.6   Inner model and hypotheses testing

Six relationships were discovered to have a (t-value ≥ 1.645) based on the path coefficient results (as shown in Table 9). (significance level at 0.05 and 0.01 level). In

this study, all the main independent constructs showed a significant positive relationship with attitude. Source credibility (β = 0.377), (t = 5.851), (p = 0.000), meaning transfer (β = 0.254), (t = 3.485), (p = 0.000) and subjective norms (β = 0.217), (t = 2.947), (p = 0.003) indicates a significant relationship with attitude. Thus, H2, H4, and H6 are supported. Furthermore, the correlations between the independent variables and the mediator concerning purchase intention were investigated. Source credibility (β = 0.328), (t = 5.594), (p = 0.000), subjective norms (β = 0.141), (t = 2.483), (p = 0.013), attitude (β = 0.549), (t = 10.143), (p = 0.000) and all indicated a significant relationship with purchase intention. Thus, H1, H5, and H7 are supported. The relationship between meaning transfer with purchase intention was not supported (β = –0.077), (t = 1.439), (p = 0.150). As the t-value < 1.645 and p-value > 0.05. Thus, H3 is not supported. Refer to Table 9.

Table 9   Assessment of path coefficient of direct relationships (n = 313)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. beta (β)	Std. error	t-value	p-value	Results
H1	Source credibility $\rightarrow$ purchase intention	0.328	0.059	5.594	0.000**	S
H2	Source credibility $\rightarrow$ attitude	0.377	0.065	5.851	0.000**	S
H3	Meaning transfer $\rightarrow$ purchase intention	–0.077	0.054	1.439	0.150	NS
H4	Meaning transfer $\rightarrow$ attitude	0.254	0.073	3.485	0.000**	S
H5	Subjective norms $\rightarrow$ purchase intention	0.141	0.057	2.483	0.013*	S
H6	Subjective norms $\rightarrow$ attitude	0.217	0.074	2.947	0.003**	S
H7	Attitude $\rightarrow$ purchase intention	0.549	0.054	10.143	0.000**	S

Note: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; S (supported), NS (not supported)

After the hypothesis testing bootstrapping measures by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was utilised to investigate the mediation impact, Table 10 specified that there is a supported indirect effect for H8, H9, and H10 with β = 0.207, β = 0.139, β = 0.119 respectively, Also the t-values amount were 5.12, 3.69 and 2.735, respectively. Furthermore, when the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not straddle a zero between the higher and lower intervals, mediation effects were observed (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). This condition was applied on H8 (0.116, 0.286), H9 (0.057, 0.230), and H10 (0.056, 0.237), while zero was not straddled in between, demonstrating the presence of mediation effects in these three hypotheses. To put it another way, H8, H9, and H10 were all supported. Refer to Table 10.

The R^2 score of 0.54 for attitude suggests that three predictors explain 54% of the variance in attitude, namely source credibility, meaning transfer, and subjective norms. The R^2 value of purchase intention is 0.73, which means that four factors account for 73% of the variance in purchase intention, namely attitude, source credibility, meaning transfer, and subjective norms. In terms of explanatory power, the R^2 score of attitude and purchase intention exhibited substantial explanatory power as their values are greater than 0.26 (Cohen, 1988). There are two groups of effect sizes in this study. The first group is for three construct effect sizes on attitude. The second group is for four construct

effect sizes on purchase intention. Among these, source credibility has a medium effect size of 0.156 on attitude. Meaning transfer and subjective norms result in a small effect size of (0.067, 0.054), respectively, on attitude. However, in the second group of effect sizes on purchase intention, there is a large effect size (0.522) between attitude and purchase intention. Also, source credibility has a medium effect size of 0.168 on purchase intention.

Table 10 Hypothesis testing for indirect relationships

Hypothesis	Relationship	Indirect effect	Confidence interval	t-value	Decision
H8	Source credibility -> attitude -> purchase intention	0.192	(.116, .286)	4.410	Supported
H9	Meaning transfer -> attitude -> purchase intention	0.149	(.057, .230)	3.368	Supported
H10	Subjective norms -> attitude -> purchase intention	0.145	(.056, .237)	3.145	Supported

On the contrary, meaning transfer (0.01) has a trivial effect size. Meanwhile, subjective norm carries a small effect size of 0.035 on purchase intention. Lastly, the dependent variables, [i.e., attitude (0.370) and purchase intention (0.630)] yielded a Q^2 value greater than zero, showing that this study's model exhibits a predictive relevance and validity.

5 Discussion

Based on the analysis above, in the context of influencer marketing, hypotheses H1 and H2 were correct and supported because source credibility has a significant relationship with attitude and purchase intention. This supports the source credibility theory that the perceived amount of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of an endorser determines the efficacy of a message – a credible source of information influences people's beliefs and attitudes and, ultimately, their behaviour. Endorser credibility is the source qualification that directly impacts the amount of conviction necessary to persuade consumers to buy products (Wang et al., 2017). As referred to path coefficient analysis, source credibility (β = 0.377) is the most significant factor in influencing consumers' attitudes. In addition, source credibility (β = 0.328) is the second most significant factor in influencing consumers' purchase intention. It implies that a 1% increase in credibility will have a 37.7% increase in consumer attitude and a 32.8% increase in consumer purchase intention. Muda et al. (2014) argued that in advertising studies, the most generally utilised effectiveness indicators for endorsement are attitude and purchase intention. This study adopted those measures as representing consumers' attitudes and intentions towards advertisements endorsed by SMIs. Generally, findings from previous studies strongly indicate that source credibility impacts consumer attitude and purchase behaviour. Thus, they serve as valuable measures of advertising effectiveness. In this study, people in Malaysia have shown a positive attitude and intention to purchase the endorsed products by a credible influencer. Hence, marketers should choose credible influencers when they want to advertise their products as they highly impact consumers' attitudes and intentions.

Secondly, the social media influencer's meaning transfer appeared to have a direct, positive effect on attitude toward the endorsement. However, no direct influence of meaning transfer on purchase intention was found. In this study, there was no direct connection between meaning transfer and purchase intention but the corroborated sequential influences of attitude toward the purchase intention suggest the merit of studying meaning transfer effect on both attitude and purchase intention using SMIs' endorsement via both direct and indirect impacts. It can be concluded that meaning transfer did not seem to impact consumers' purchase intention directly. The main reason identified was the SMIs' failure to convey product meanings along with the endorsement process and inadequate communication and conversations with their followers. Thus, consumers could not assign endorsers meanings through personal and social interactions.

Next, subjective norm is positively related to attitude, and purchase intention (H5 and H6) were both supported and showed significant effects. Other researchers had similar results of a significant relationship between subjective norms on attitude and intentions in various study contexts (Chang, 1998; Chetioui et al., 2020; Dalila et al., 2020; Mangafić et al., 2017; Peña-García et al., 2020). Malaysian consumers are easily persuaded by social media marketing and are impacted by subjective norms inside the social media world. Consumers who follow their favourite SMIs are exposed to their behaviours online, and they are affected by the social pressure those influencers make when they endorse the products. Therefore, consumers' behaviour is affected and conformed to the SMIs' behaviour. From the study's findings, one can say that Malaysian consumer interactions with SMIs' endorsements on social media can be considered norm-controlled behaviour, which means that they are affected by the social pressure from the endorsed products by influencers which affect their attitude and purchasing behaviour. This reconfirmed that subjective norm has a more significant impact on attitude and purchase intentions in Malaysia, where the collectivist culture prevails. Malaysian consumers perceive their favourite SMIs as their close friends and consider them vital. As a result, the communication strategies used by marketers and SMIs when promoting products should highlight social values rather than personal values, and the SMIs should act as close friends to their followers and build a strong bond with the followers to influence their attitudes and intentions. The findings of this study support the TRA, where there is a significant relationship between subjective norm and (attitude and purchase intention) in the influencer marketing context.

Moreover, attitude exhibits a significant relationship with purchase intention in the influencer marketing context (H7) was supported. This supports the TRA, which predicts that attitude is a determinant of behavioural intention. As referred to in path coefficient analysis, attitude ($\beta = 0.549$) is found to be the most significant factor in influencing purchase intention. It implies that a 1% increase in attitude will have a 54.9% increase in purchase intention in the influencer marketing context. Scholars studied a positive association between customer attitude and their purchase intentions in the context of influencer marketing (Astuti and Risqiani, 2020; Chetioui et al., 2020; Chin et al., 2019; Dalila et al., 2020).

This study further reasserted that consumers will keep purchasing the endorsed products if they show a favourable attitude towards the social media influencer. The significant relationship as illustrated in the path model supports the assertion that attitude influences consumers' intention in the influencer marketing context. Attitude is a salient factor that influences intention, as indicated by the TRA. It implies that Malaysians have shown a positive attitude towards the social media influencer's endorsement. Hence,

marketers should focus on choosing the most suitable influencer for their brand who holds favourable attributes and provide value to the followers. Moreover, SMIs should always build a positive relationship with their followers and make sure they are likeable, and followers exhibit positive feelings about them. This means that followers who prefer SMIs are more inclined to buy the items recommended by them.

Lastly, consumer attitude significantly mediated the relationship between source credibility, meaning transfer, and subjective norms (H8, H9, H10). According to the findings of this study, respondents' confidence in SMIs resulted in a very favourable attitude toward a brand or product, which led to a purchase intention. The more credible the social media influencer, the more positive consumers' attitudes and willingness to buy the recommended products. Furthermore, the strength and effectiveness of a well-designed recommendation are derived from the successful transfer of meaning. Customers might claim a symbolic meaning and reflect an ideal self-concept when consuming products. Finally, if customers truly believe that SMIs are important to them, they are more likely to acquire the product recommended by them.

6   Implications and conclusions

From a theoretical standpoint, this research has contributed to significant improvements in the influencer marketing literature. This study proved the applicability of the TRA in the context of influencer marketing. Besides that, this study offers a new theoretical insight from the Malaysian perspective by enhancing the emerging literature in the marketing field on the effects of SMIs on the attitudes and purchase intentions of customers. This means that consumers are highly dependent on the opinion of their favourite SMIs, and they consider them vital and influential. This finding was supported by Pop et al. (2021). Moreover, consumers' decision to purchase a product would be less dominated by their perception of the product's usefulness than by the influence of their favourite social media influencer.

From a managerial standpoint, this study provided marketers with several practical considerations when choosing SMIs to endorse their brands in a highly competitive market. It is the marketer's right and discretion to select a social media influencer capable of attracting and engaging a targeted audience with an appealing advertising message. According to the findings of this study, consumer attitude has the most significant influence on purchase intention. As a result, marketers should identify the ideal social media influencer to influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Furthermore, the findings offer important insights and suggestions for businesses, marketers, marketing agencies, and influencers. Endorsing items and products is extremely helpful for SMIs and the business. Collaboration with SMIs can generate money for businesses. Collaboration with businesses allows SMIs to monetise their reputation and popularity while expanding their impact. Influencer marketing is a relatively new concept in Malaysia. As a result, this study provides empirical evidence on how the purchase intention of products endorsed by SMIs is critical for industry practitioners to make a strategic decision on whether to increase investment in influencer marketing or not. In the Malaysian context, customers heavily rely on influencers to decide on their purchases, and this is an opportunity for businesses to leverage the available influencers to bring about more sales through the online platform. It can also be useful for companies when developing their social media communication strategy. SMIs can assist in increasing

consumer-brand interactions. Communication between SMIs and their followers via content-sharing communities may convey brand-related messages and encourage followers to consume products and services. As a result of this study, marketing practitioners should consider selecting SMIs for advertising campaigns in order to achieve successful marketing communication. Marketers must select SMIs with a large number of followers and a significant impact on their online communities in order to increase customers' desire to copy them and purchase promoted items.

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of SMIs' effectiveness by using the constructs of source credibility, meaning transfer, subjective norms, attitude, and purchase intention. Marketers can develop promotional strategies to shape customers' decisions in a positive and impactful way regarding their products and services.

7 Limitations and future studies

Despite that this study has provided numerous insights to both literature and practitioners in influencer marketing, there are still a few limitations that provide chances for future studies. Firstly, this research merely focuses on a Malaysian setting, making it challenging to represent consumers with different backgrounds. Future research is advised to duplicate the model elsewhere, especially in Asian countries, to provide a more generalised finding that can be adopted widely in the context of influencer marketing. Individuals' financial status was not mentioned in order to decide how consumers' monthly income will play a role in deciding their reaction to the social media influencer's endorsement. Furthermore, cross-country comparisons, particularly between collectivist and individualistic civilisations, may give information on nations with better endorsement efficacy. Lastly, no specific industry nor brand was chosen. Future studies should choose an industry or a specific brand and assess how the results will change accordingly.

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