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Impact of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) Marketing Strategies and Cafe Brand Personality on Patronage Intention: A Customer Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) characteristics on consumers' Patronage Intention and the mediating role of café Brand Personality within the Malaysian café industry, addressing the limited empirical integration of these constructs in this context. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among café consumers in Klang Valley, Malaysia, using purposive sampling, with 145 valid responses analyzed through reliability, multiple regression, and mediation analyses. The findings revealed that KOLs Attractiveness and Trustworthiness significantly influenced Patronage Intention, whereas Expertise did not demonstrate a significant direct effect. Café Brand Personality partially mediated the relationships between KOLs characteristics and Patronage Intention, with Sincerity and Ruggedness emerging as the most consistent mediating dimensions. The study is limited to café consumers in Klang Valley and a cross-sectional design, restricting geographical generalizability and longitudinal interpretation. From a practical perspective, Malaysian café operators should priorities attractive and trustworthy KOLs whose communication aligns with authentic and distinctive café Brand Personalities. This study contributes to the literature by integrating KOL characteristics, five Brand Personality dimensions, and Patronage Intention within a Malaysian café framework and identifying the specific Brand Personality dimensions underlying the mediating mechanism.

Keywords: Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), Brand Personality, Patronage Intention, Café Industry, Malaysia

Introduction

The Malaysian café industry has experienced rapid growth and increasing competition, driven by changes in consumer lifestyles, urbanization, and the normalization of café visits as part of social and working routines. Malaysia's domestic coffee market was valued at approximately

US$1.05 billion, with more than 6,400 cafés operating nationwide. In addition, Malaysia's branded coffee shop market recorded substantial year-on-year growth, reflecting strong market demand and increasing consumer choice (The Star, 2025; New Straits Times, 2025). As consumers are presented with more café alternatives and lower switching barriers, patronage intention has become increasingly important for business sustainability. Contemporary consumers visit cafés not only for food and beverages but also for social interaction, lifestyle experiences, and emotional value. Consequently, café operators need to differentiate themselves beyond product quality by developing meaningful brand identities and marketing strategies that strengthen consumers' patronage intention.

The rapid development of social media has also transformed traditional marketing strategies within the café industry. Consumers are increasingly exposed to online reviews, recommendations, and social media content when evaluating cafés and making patronage decisions. Within this digital environment, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have become influential social actors who shape consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions through their characteristics, credibility, and interactions with followers. KOL marketing enables businesses to communicate with target consumers through more personalized and relatable content, while KOLs can function as a bridge between café brands and consumers by communicating brand-related information and influencing consumers' perceptions of the café. Therefore, the growing role of KOLs within digital marketing provides an important basis for examining how KOLs characteristics may influence consumers' patronage intention within the Malaysian café industry (Chen et al., 2024).

At the same time, café brand personality has become an important strategic asset for creating competitive differentiation. Brand personality refers to a set of human characteristics associated with a brand and reflects how consumers perceive and associate humanlike characteristics with a particular brand. Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Framework conceptualizes brand personality through five dimensions, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These dimensions represent different human characteristics that consumers associate with brands and enable organizations to differentiate themselves within increasingly competitive markets. Within the café industry, a distinctive brand personality enables consumers to develop stronger emotional attachment and favorable perceptions towards the café, which may subsequently strengthen patronage intention. Recent research further indicates that brand personality remains important in explaining consumer–brand relationships, as consumers increasingly evaluate brands through symbolic meanings, emotional values, and digital interactions in addition to product and service attributes (Jun & Yi, 2025). Therefore, developing a distinctive café brand personality is increasingly important for attracting consumers and strengthening long-term relationships within the competitive café industry.

Although KOLs marketing and brand personality have received increasing attention in marketing research, limited empirical studies have specifically examined the integration of KOLs characteristics, café brand personality, and patronage intention within the Malaysian café industry. Previous studies have primarily examined KOLs marketing, brand personality, customer satisfaction, service quality, and brand image independently, resulting in limited empirical evidence integrating the three KOLs characteristics of attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness with the five dimensions of café brand personality and patronage intention

within a single conceptual framework. Furthermore, previous studies have seldom investigated which specific dimensions of brand personality most effectively mediate the influence of KOLs characteristics on patronage intention. Consequently, the underlying mechanism through which KOLs characteristics influence consumers' patronage intention via café brand personality remains insufficiently understood, creating an important theoretical and practical research gap within the Malaysian café industry.

To address these research gaps, this study investigates the relationships among Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) characteristics, café brand personality, and consumers' patronage intention within the Malaysian café industry. Specifically, the study examines how the three KOLs characteristics, namely attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness, influence consumers' patronage intention and evaluates the mediating role of the five café brand personality dimensions, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The overarching motivation of this study is to provide a clearer understanding of how KOLs characteristics are translated into consumers' behavioral intentions through café brand personality. By integrating these constructs into a single research framework, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of consumer behavior while providing practical insights for Malaysian café operators in developing more effective KOLs marketing and brand personality strategies to strengthen consumers' patronage intention.

Literature Review

Key Opinion Leader (KOLs) Marketing

The rapid development of social media has transformed traditional marketing into interactive digital marketing, enabling businesses to communicate and engage directly with consumers through online platforms. Within this environment, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) marketing refers to a marketing strategy that involves collaborating with influential individuals to connect consumers with brands through communication and interaction. KOLs commonly introduce products and services by sharing their opinions, experiences, recommendations, and reviews through social media platforms, which may subsequently influence consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions (Zak & Hasprova, 2021). Unlike conventional advertising, KOLs marketing enables brands to communicate with target consumers through more personalized and relatable content by leveraging the characteristics, expertise, and trusted relationships that KOLs establish with their followers (Yihui, 2024).

KOLs are recognized as influential individuals whose knowledge, experience, credibility, and relationships with followers enable them to shape consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions. KOLs who demonstrate relevant expertise are capable of providing valuable information, recommendations, and product evaluations, thereby strengthening the credibility and persuasiveness of the information communicated to consumers. Similarly, trustworthy KOLs can reinforce consumer confidence by communicating brand-related information in a genuine and credible manner. However, the effectiveness of KOLs marketing does not depend solely on an influencer's popularity or follower count, as different KOLs characteristics may influence consumers through different mechanisms (Spörl-Wang, Krause, & Henkel, 2025). Therefore, understanding the specific characteristics that determine KOL effectiveness is particularly important in explaining consumers' perceptions and patronage intention.

The Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) Characteristics Model provides the theoretical basis for examining the characteristics that determine the effectiveness of KOLs in influencing consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions. In this study, KOLs characteristics are operationalized through three distinct dimensions, namely attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Attractiveness refers not only to physical appearance but also to the overall appeal, communication style, and social image of a KOLs, which may attract consumers' attention and strengthen favorable perceptions towards promoted brands. Expertise refers to the perceived knowledge, experience, competence, and professional capability of a KOLs within a particular field, enabling the KOLs to provide valuable information, recommendations, and product evaluations to consumers. Trustworthiness refers to consumers' perceptions of a KOL's honesty, integrity, reliability, and credibility, which may strengthen consumer confidence in the information communicated. These three characteristics are examined separately because each may influence consumers through different psychological mechanisms: attractiveness may stimulate emotional appeal, expertise may strengthen perceptions of knowledge and competence, while trustworthiness may reinforce credibility and confidence in marketing messages. Therefore, examining these dimensions individually enables the study to determine how specific KOLs characteristics influence café brand personality and consumers' patronage intention.

Café Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to a set of human characteristics associated with a brand and reflects how consumers perceive and associate humanlike characteristics with a particular brand. This study adopts Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Framework, which conceptualizes brand personality through five distinct dimensions, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The framework is adopted because it provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how consumers perceive and emotionally connect with brands, while each dimension represents a unique aspect of consumers' psychological evaluation of a brand. Within the café industry, consumers may perceive cafés differently based on the values, symbolic meanings, and experiences communicated by the brand. Therefore, examining all five dimensions enables a more comprehensive understanding of café brand personality and its role in shaping consumers' emotional attachment and patronage intention. Brand personality also remains relevant within contemporary digital marketing environments, where consumers increasingly develop symbolic and emotional relationships with brands through digital interactions (Jun & Yi, 2025).

Within the café industry, brand personality enables businesses to differentiate themselves beyond their products and services by creating symbolic meanings and emotional value for consumers. Consumers are more likely to develop stronger emotional connections and favorable behavioral responses when a café's brand personality aligns with their self-concept, lifestyle, personal preferences, and emotional expectations. As contemporary cafés are increasingly perceived as lifestyle-oriented and experiential spaces rather than merely places for food and beverage consumption, establishing a distinctive café brand personality can strengthen consumers' emotional attachment and favorable perceptions towards the café, ultimately enhancing their patronage intention (Jun & Yi, 2025).

The sincerity dimension reflects honesty, genuineness, warmth, and trustworthiness, while excitement represents creativity, energy, trendiness, and adventurousness. Competence reflects reliability, professionalism, efficiency, and the capability to consistently deliver the promised value, whereas sophistication represents elegance, prestige, exclusiveness, and premium lifestyle. Ruggedness reflects strength, toughness, boldness, uniqueness, and an adventurous identity. Each dimension therefore represents a distinct aspect of consumers' psychological evaluation of a brand, allowing consumers to develop different perceptions and emotional associations with café brands.

Previous studies have demonstrated that brand personality influences consumers' attitudes, emotional attachment, trust, brand identification, and behavioural intentions. Within the context of this study, café brand personality is proposed as a mediating mechanism because KOLs marketing may first shape consumers' perceptions of the values, emotions, and symbolic meanings associated with a café brand. These brand personality perceptions subsequently influence consumers' emotional attachment, brand evaluation, and behavioural responses, ultimately affecting their patronage intention. Therefore, examining café brand personality as a mediator provides an explanation of how KOLs characteristics may be translated into consumers' patronage intention rather than assuming that KOLs marketing influences behavioural intention solely through direct effects.

Patronage Intention

Patronage intention refers to consumers' behavioral intention to visit, revisit, repurchase, recommend, and continue choosing a particular business over competing alternatives. Within the café industry, patronage intention represents an important indicator of consumers' willingness to maintain an ongoing relationship with a café rather than switching to competitors. It is particularly important within the increasingly competitive Malaysian café industry, where consumers are presented with numerous café alternatives and relatively low switching barriers. Therefore, strengthening consumers' patronage intention is important for sustaining long-term customer relationships and enhancing the competitive position of café businesses (Sheriff et al., 2025).

Within the café industry, patronage intention may be influenced by consumers' previous purchasing experiences, café ambience, emotional attachment, and perceptions of the café brand. The increasing use of social media has further strengthened the role of KOLs marketing in shaping consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions through recommendations, reviews, and brand-related content. Within this process, KOLs characteristics may influence how consumers perceive the personality of a café brand, while a stronger café brand personality may subsequently enhance consumers' emotional attachment and patronage intention. Therefore, café brand personality provides a psychological mechanism through which the influence of KOLs characteristics may be translated into consumers' patronage intention.

Consequently, the effectiveness of KOLs marketing may extend beyond its direct influence on consumers' behavioral intentions, as KOLs characteristics can shape consumers' perceptions of café brand personality, which may subsequently strengthen emotional attachment and enhance patronage intention.

Research Hypotheses

Drawing on the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1–H3: Each KOL characteristic has a significant relationship with Patronage Intention (H1: Attractiveness; H2: Expertise; H3: Trustworthiness).

H4(a)–H4(e): Each of the five Brand Personality dimensions mediates the relationship between KOLs Attractiveness and Patronage Intention (H4(a): Sincerity; H4(b): Excitement; H4(c): Competence; H4(d): Sophistication; H4(e): Ruggedness).

H5(a)–H5(e): Each of the five Brand Personality dimensions mediates the relationship between KOLs Expertise and Patronage Intention (H5(a): Sincerity; H5(b): Excitement; H5(c): Competence; H5(d): Sophistication; H5(e): Ruggedness).

H6(a)–H6(e): Each of the five Brand Personality dimensions mediates the relationship between KOLs Trustworthiness and Patronage Intention (H6(a): Sincerity; H6(b): Excitement; H6(c): Competence; H6(d): Sophistication; H6(e): Ruggedness).

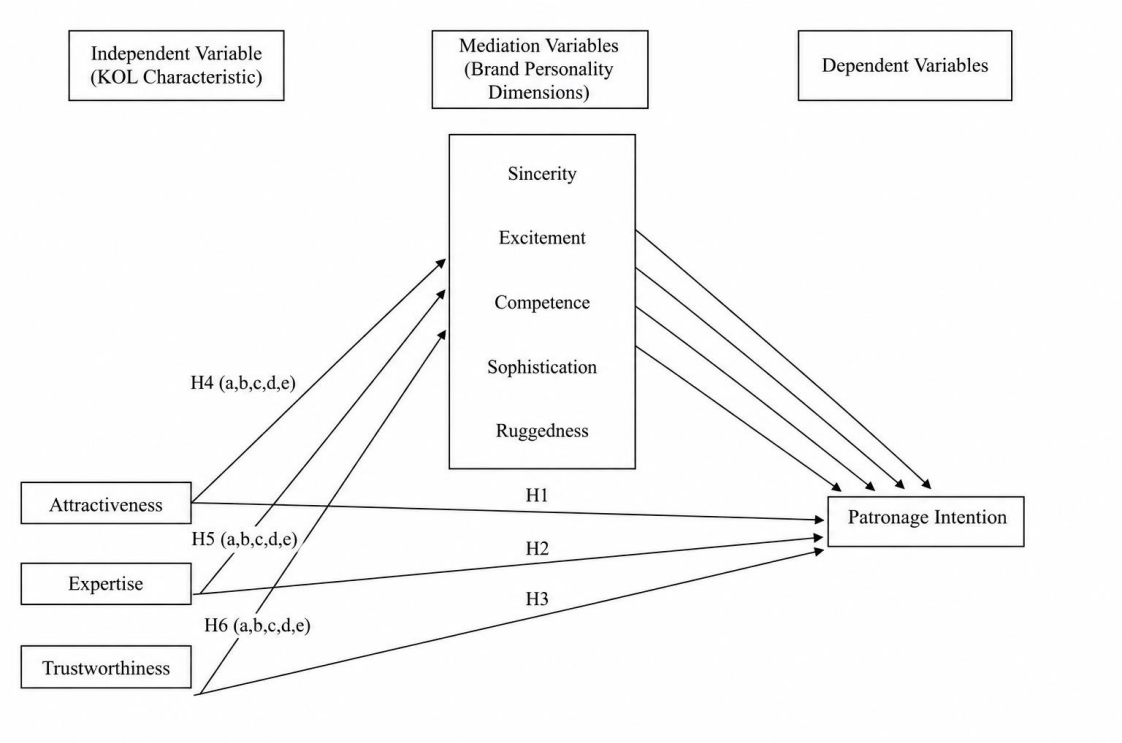

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Method

This study adopted a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among Key Opinion Leader (KOLs) characteristics, café brand personality, and consumers' patronage intention within the Malaysian café industry. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables the proposed hypotheses to be empirically tested and the relationships among the study variables to be statistically examined. The cross-sectional design allowed data to be collected from respondents at a specific point in time to evaluate the proposed relationships within the research framework.

The target population comprised café consumers in Klang Valley, Malaysia. As no comprehensive sampling frame was available for café consumers, purposive sampling was employed to recruit respondents who were relevant to the context of the study. Respondents were required to be café consumers with exposure to café-related content shared by Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) through social media platforms. A total of 145 valid questionnaires were collected and used for the data analysis.

Primary data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section A collected respondents' demographic information. Section B measured the three KOLs characteristics, namely attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Section C measured café brand personality based on Aaker's (1997) five dimensions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, while Section D measured consumers' patronage intention. All measurement items were adapted from established literature and assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”).

Prior to the main survey, the adapted questionnaire underwent expert validation to assess the clarity, relevance, representativeness, and suitability of the measurement items. Following the expert assessment and preliminary respondent evaluation, minor revisions were made to improve the clarity and readability of the questionnaire before pilot testing. A pilot study involving 30 respondents was subsequently conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement instrument using Cronbach's Alpha. The results demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.960 for KOLs characteristics, 0.946 for café brand personality, and 0.746 for patronage intention. As all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, the measurement instrument was considered sufficiently reliable for the main data collection.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were employed to summaries respondents' demographic profiles, while reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the direct effects of KOLs Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness on consumers' Patronage Intention. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was subsequently conducted to examine the mediating role of the five dimensions of café Brand Personality, namely Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness, in the relationships between KOLs characteristics and Patronage Intention. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

Findings

Respondent Profile

A total of 145 valid responses were collected from café consumers in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Female respondents constituted 60.0% of the sample, while respondents aged between 35 and 44 years represented the largest age group (41.4%). In terms of monthly income, the largest proportions of respondents earned between RM3,001 and RM5,000 (25.5%) and between RM5,001 and RM8,000 (25.5%). Regarding café visitation frequency, 26.9% of respondents visited cafés once a week and 27.6% visited once a fortnight. The largest proportion of respondents spent between RM51 and RM100 per café visit (38.6%), while

45.5% typically visited cafés with one companion. Regarding social media exposure, Facebook was the most frequently selected platform for accessing café-related content (88.3%), followed by YouTube (82.1%) and Instagram (80.7%). Xiaohongshu (REDnote), TikTok, and X (Twitter) were selected by 44.1%, 34.5%, and 18.6% of respondents, respectively. In terms of preferred café characteristics, food quality was most frequently selected (87.6%), followed by a comfortable environment (79.3%), cleanliness (76.6%), atmosphere (73.8%), and service quality (70.3%). Overall, the respondents demonstrated relevant café consumption experience and exposure to café-related social media content, supporting their suitability for examining the relationships among KOLs characteristics, café brand personality, and patronage intention.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the study constructs using Cronbach's Alpha. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.794 to 0.923. Patronage Intention recorded a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.794. The three KOLs characteristics demonstrated high internal consistency, with values of 0.904 for Attractiveness, 0.912 for Trustworthiness, and 0.923 for Expertise. Similarly, all five dimensions of café Brand Personality demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.806 for Sincerity, 0.854 for Excitement, 0.898 for Sophistication, 0.911 for competence, and 0.902 for Ruggedness. Overall, the results confirmed that all measurement constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and were suitable for subsequent statistical analyses.

Direct Effect Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the direct effects of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness on Patronage Intention. The regression model demonstrated strong explanatory power, with $R = 0.755$ and $R^2 = 0.569$, indicating that the three KOL characteristics collectively explained 56.9% of the variance in Patronage Intention. The Adjusted R^2 value of 0.560 further indicated that the model maintained satisfactory explanatory power after accounting for the number of predictors. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 132) = 58.182$, $p < .001$, demonstrating that KOLs Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness collectively contributed significantly to the prediction of Patronage Intention. These findings confirmed that the regression model was statistically appropriate for subsequently examining the individual contribution of each KOLs characteristic to Patronage Intention.

Table 1
Regression Coefficients for Direct Effect Analysis

Predictor	***B***	***Std. Error***	***Beta***	***T***	***Sig.***
KOL Attractiveness	*0.267*	*0.092*	*0.338*	*2.897*	*0.004*
KOL Expertise	*0.030*	*0.088*	*0.035*	*0.345*	*0.731*
KOL Trustworthiness	*0.308*	*0.111*	*0.381*	*2.761*	*0.007*

Table 1 presents the regression coefficients for the direct effect analysis. KOL Attractiveness demonstrated a positive and statistically significant effect on Patronage Intention (B = 0.267, β = 0.338, t = 2.897, p = 0.004), thereby supporting H1. In contrast, KOL Expertise did not demonstrate a statistically significant effect on Patronage Intention (B = 0.030, β = 0.035, t = 0.345, p = 0.731); therefore, H2 was rejected. KOL Trustworthiness demonstrated a positive and statistically significant effect on Patronage Intention (B = 0.308, β = 0.381, t = 2.761, p = 0.007), thereby supporting H3. Among the three KOL characteristics, Trustworthiness emerged as the strongest significant predictor of Patronage Intention, followed by Attractiveness, whereas Expertise did not significantly influence Patronage Intention.

Mediation Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the mediating role of the five café Brand Personality dimensions in the relationships between KOLs characteristics and Patronage Intention.

Mediation Analysis of KOLs Attractiveness

KOLs Attractiveness, Model 1 explained 43.9% of the variance in Patronage Intention (R^2 = 0.439). After incorporating the five Brand Personality dimensions, the explained variance increased to 61.0% (R^2 = 0.610). The increase in explanatory power was statistically significant (R^2 = 0.170, F Change = 11.430, p < .001), indicating that the inclusion of Brand Personality significantly improved the model.

Table 2
Mediation Analysis of KOLs Attractiveness

Model	**Predictor**	**Unstandardized Coefficient (B)**	**Standard Error**	**Standardized Coefficient (Beta)**	**t-value**	**Sig.**
1	Constant	1.167	0.240		4.858	.000
	KOLs Attractiveness	0.630	0.061	0.663	10.319	.000
2	Constant	0.301	0.275		1.094	.276
	KOLs Attractiveness	0.336	0.074	0.353	4.561	.000
	Brand Personality	0.324	0.103	0.308	3.156	.002

	Sincerity					
	Brand Personality Excitement	0.184	0.110	0.174	1.668	.098
	Brand Personality Sophistication	0.031	0.084	0.034	0.371	.711
	Brand Personality Competence	-0.248	0.115	-0.222	-2.148	.034
	Brand Personality Ruggedness	0.249	0.073	0.277	3.424	.001

As shown in *Table 2*, KOLs Attractiveness had a significant positive effect on Patronage Intention in Model 1 (β = 0.663, p < .001). After the inclusion of the five Brand Personality dimensions in Model 2, the effect remained statistically significant but decreased to β = 0.353 (p < .001), indicating partial mediation. Among the five Brand Personality dimensions, Sincerity (β = 0.308, p = .002), Competence (β = −0.222, p = .034), and Ruggedness (β = 0.277, p = .001) demonstrated significant effects, whereas Excitement (β = 0.174, p = .098) and Sophistication (β = 0.034, p = .711) were not statistically significant. Accordingly, H4(a), H4(c), and H4(e) were accepted, while H4(b) and H4(d) were rejected. The results indicate partial mediation through Sincerity, Competence, and Ruggedness, with the effect through competence occurring in a negative direction.

Mediation Analysis of KOLs Expertise

For KOLs Expertise, Model 1 explained 34.0% of the variance in Patronage Intention (R^2 = 0.340). After incorporating the five Brand Personality dimensions, the explained variance increased to 57.7% (R^2 = 0.577). The increase in explanatory power was statistically significant (R^2 = 0.237, F Change = 14.674, p < .001), indicating that the inclusion of Brand Personality significantly improved the explanatory power of the model.

Table 3
Mediation Analysis of KOLs Expertise

Model	Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t-value	Sig.
1	Constant	1.451	0.262		5.549	.000
	KOLs Expertise	0.535	0.064	0.583	8.367	.000
2	Constant	0.337	0.286		1.178	.241
	KOLs Expertise	0.225	0.075	0.246	3.014	.003
	Brand Personality	0.356	0.106	0.338	3.348	.001

	Sincerity				
	Brand Personality Excitement	0.195	0.115	0.184	1.691	.093
	Brand Personality Sophistication	0.041	0.087	0.044	0.464	.643
	Brand Personality Competence	-0.244	0.124	-0.218	-1.967	.050
	Brand Personality Ruggedness	0.285	0.075	0.318	3.810	.000

As shown in *Table 3*, KOLs Expertise had a significant positive effect on Patronage Intention in Model 1 (β = 0.583, p < .001). After the inclusion of the five Brand Personality dimensions in Model 2, the effect remained statistically significant but decreased to β = 0.246 (p = .003), indicating partial mediation. Among the five Brand Personality dimensions, Sincerity (β = 0.338, p = .001), Competence (β = −0.218, p = .050), and Ruggedness (β = 0.318, p < .001) demonstrated significant effects, whereas Excitement (β = 0.184, p = .093) and Sophistication (β = 0.044, p = .643) were not statistically significant. Accordingly, H5(a), H5(c), and H5(e) were supported, while H5(b) and H5(d) were rejected. Overall, the results indicate that Brand Personality partially mediated the relationship between KOLs Expertise and Patronage Intention through Sincerity, Competence, and Ruggedness.

Mediation Analysis of KOLs Trustworthiness

For KOLs Trustworthiness, Model 1 explained 49.7% of the variance in Patronage Intention ($R^2 = 0.497$). After incorporating the five Brand Personality dimensions, the explained variance increased to 61.2% ($R^2 = 0.612$). The increase in explanatory power was statistically significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.115$, F Change = 7.751, p < .001), indicating that the inclusion of Brand Personality significantly improved the explanatory power of the model.

Table 4
Mediation Analysis of KOLs Trustworthiness

Model	Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t-value	Sig.
1	Constant	1.435	0.192		7.471	.000
	KOLs Trustworthiness	0.589	0.051	0.705	11.595	.000
2	Constant	0.451	0.274		1.646	.102
	KOLs Trustworthiness	0.309	0.066	0.370	4.664	.000

Brand Personality Sincerity	0.297	0.103	0.282	2.877	.005
Brand Personality Excitement	0.152	0.110	0.143	1.382	.169
Brand Personality Sophistication	0.022	0.084	0.024	0.263	.793
Brand Personality Competence	-0.145	0.111	-0.130	-1.300	.196
Brand Personality Ruggedness	0.204	0.075	0.227	2.712	.008

As shown in *Table 4*, KOLs Trustworthiness had a significant positive effect on Patronage Intention in Model 1 (β = 0.705, p < .001). After the inclusion of the five Brand Personality dimensions in Model 2, the effect remained statistically significant but decreased to β = 0.370 (p < .001), indicating partial mediation. Among the five Brand Personality dimensions, Sincerity (β = 0.282, p = .005) and Ruggedness (β = 0.227, p = .008) demonstrated significant effects, whereas Excitement (β = 0.143, p = .169), Sophistication (β = 0.024, p = .793), and Competence (β = −0.130, p = .196) were not statistically significant. Accordingly, H6(a) and H6(e) were supported, while H6(b), H6(c), and H6(d) were rejected. Overall, the results indicate that Brand Personality partially mediated the relationship between KOLs Trustworthiness and Patronage Intention through Sincerity and Ruggedness.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) characteristics on consumers' Patronage Intention and investigated the mediating role of café Brand Personality within the Malaysian café industry. The findings demonstrate that KOLs characteristics influence Patronage Intention differently, while selected Brand Personality dimensions serve as important mechanisms through which KOLs characteristics influence consumers' patronage decisions.

Discussion of Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1: To examine the influence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) characteristics (attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness) on consumers' patronage intention within the Malaysian café industry.

The findings revealed that KOLs Attractiveness and Trustworthiness had significant positive influences on Patronage Intention, whereas KOLs Expertise did not demonstrate a significant direct effect. Among the three characteristics, Trustworthiness emerged as the strongest predictor of Patronage Intention, followed by Attractiveness.

These findings suggest that consumers place greater emphasis on KOLs who are perceived as trustworthy, authentic, attractive, and relatable when making café patronage decisions. In

contrast, expertise alone may not be sufficient to influence Patronage Intention because café consumption is primarily associated with lifestyle experiences, social interaction, and leisure activities rather than technical or professional decision-making. Consequently, consumers may place greater emphasis on authenticity, trustworthiness, and relatability than on professional knowledge when responding to KOL recommendations.

From a managerial perspective, café operators should prioritise KOLs who are capable of establishing credibility, creating authentic relationships with their audiences, and communicating engaging café experiences. Rather than relying solely on professional expertise or popularity, café operators should select KOLs whose characteristics align with consumers' preferences and the desired Brand Personality of the café.

Discussion of Research Objective 2

Research Objective 2: To examine the mediating role of café brand personality dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness) in the relationship between Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) characteristics and consumers' patronage intention within the Malaysian café industry.

The findings demonstrate that Brand Personality partially mediated these relationships, although the mediating effects varied across the five dimensions and the three KOLs characteristics.

For KOLs Attractiveness, Sincerity, Competence, and Ruggedness demonstrated significant mediating effects, whereas Excitement and Sophistication were not significant. Similarly, Sincerity, Competence, and Ruggedness significantly mediated the relationship between KOLs Expertise and Patronage Intention, while Excitement and Sophistication did not. For KOLs Trustworthiness, only Sincerity and Ruggedness demonstrated significant mediating effects, whereas Excitement, Competence, and Sophistication were not significant.

Overall, Sincerity and Ruggedness emerged as the most consistent mediating dimensions across all three KOLs characteristics. The findings suggest that consumers place considerable emphasis on authenticity, genuineness, uniqueness, and distinctiveness when evaluating café brands. Competence also demonstrated significant mediating effects in the relationships involving KOLs Attractiveness and Expertise, but not KOLs Trustworthiness. In contrast, Excitement and Sophistication did not demonstrate significant mediating effects across the three models.

These findings indicate that the influence of KOLs characteristics on Patronage Intention is transmitted through specific Brand Personality dimensions rather than uniformly across all five dimensions. Therefore, café operators should focus on strengthening the Brand Personality dimensions that demonstrate greater influence on consumers' patronage decisions instead of attempting to emphasise all dimensions equally.

Discussion of Research Objective 3

Research Objective 3: Does café brand personality mediate the relationship between Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) characteristics and consumers' patronage intention in the Malaysian café industry?

The findings provide practical implications for café operators seeking to strengthen consumers' Patronage Intention through KOL marketing and café Brand Personality. Café operators should prioritise KOLs who demonstrate trustworthiness, attractiveness, authenticity, and relatability, as Trustworthiness and Attractiveness were the significant direct predictors of Patronage Intention.

The findings further indicate that effective KOLs marketing should be aligned with the desired Brand Personality of the café. In particular, Sincerity and Ruggedness consistently demonstrated significant mediating effects across the three KOLs characteristics, highlighting the importance of communicating authentic, genuine, unique, and distinctive café brand identities. Competence may also be relevant when cafés collaborate with attractive or expert KOLs, although its influence was not consistent across all KOLs characteristics.

Therefore, café operators should integrate KOLs selection with Brand Personality development rather than treating them as independent marketing strategies. Aligning suitable KOLs characteristics with the Brand Personality dimensions that demonstrated significant effects may strengthen consumers' Patronage Intention and improve the effectiveness of KOLs marketing within the Malaysian café industry.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) marketing strategies on customers' Patronage Intention and the mediating role of café Brand Personality within the Malaysian café industry. In this study, KOLs marketing strategies were operationalised through three KOL characteristics, namely Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness. The findings revealed that KOLs Attractiveness and Trustworthiness significantly and positively influenced customers' Patronage Intention, whereas KOLs Expertise did not demonstrate a significant direct effect. Furthermore, café Brand Personality was found to partially mediate the relationships between KOLs characteristics and Patronage Intention. Among the five Brand Personality dimensions, Sincerity and Ruggedness emerged as the most consistent mediating dimensions across the three KOLs characteristics, while Competence demonstrated significant mediating effects in the relationships involving KOLs Attractiveness and Expertise.

The findings contribute to the existing literature on Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) marketing and Brand Personality by demonstrating that the influence of KOLs characteristics on Patronage Intention operates not only through their direct effects but also through selected café Brand Personality dimensions. The study also provides practical insights for café operators by highlighting the importance of selecting suitable KOLs and strengthening relevant Brand Personality dimensions, particularly Sincerity and Ruggedness, to enhance customers' Patronage Intention. Overall, the findings emphasise the importance of aligning KOLs characteristics with the desired café Brand Personality to strengthen the effectiveness of KOL marketing strategies within the Malaysian café industry.

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