

# Exploring the Influence of Social Media Influencers' (SMIs) Traits on Consumer Purchasing Behavior for Online Products on the TikTok Platform: The Mediating Effect of Trustworthiness

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## Abstract

In today's digital age and with the surge of social media usage, influencer marketing has emerged as a popular tool for businesses to harness the power of social media in order to interact with their target market in a more credible and engaging manner. In using this tool, it is vital for businesses to carefully plan and select the right social media influencers for their brands. The notion of finding the right social media influencer prevail the need to understand the characteristics or traits of the social media influencer. Thus, this study aims to investigate how the social media influencer's traits specifically credibility, authenticity, and expertise can influence the consumer purchasing behavior for online products and be mediated by the trustworthiness aspect. The study is a quantitative research, whereby a simple random sampling will be used for participants' selection; the social media users who buy products using the TikTok platform. A self-administered online survey questionnaire with five-point Likert scale will be applied for data collecting purposes. Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) will be used to analyze questions on the SMIs traits: credibility, authenticity, and expertise on the consumer purchase behavior. This paper explores the traits or characteristics of social media influencers as well as the mediating role of trustworthiness in shaping the consumer buying behaviour. The implications for marketers include a better understanding of how consumers engage with social media influencers on social media. Results from this study may postulate a theoretical framework for measuring consumer buying behavior based on social media influencer traits.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Influencer Marketing, Credibility, Authenticity, Expertise, Trustworthiness, Consumer Purchasing Behavior

**Introduction**

In the present globalized markets, opinion leaders play a vital role in the process of the purchasing decision-making of consumers. Based on their individual skills, specific knowledge or their personality, opinion leaders have a direct or indirect influence on the attitudes and decisions of consumers (Zak & Hasprova, 2020). The advent of digital media includes social media platforms, websites, email, blogs, podcasts, and search engine marketing has transformed the way of interaction between marketers and consumers (Agnihotri & Chaturvedi, 2023). As such, social media platforms, for instance, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and so on, has widely used by the marketers for promoting products and to reach customers with various type of marketing communications (Wallace et al., 2022). With the properly approach of using the social media, the marketers are able to create value and enhance customer engagement, partnership, and brand value (Moran et al., 2020). According to the statistics form *dataportal.com*, the number of social media users in Malaysia in January 2023 is estimated to be 26.8 million with users browsing the YouTube application reported to be the highest at 25.9 million users, followed by Facebook users with 20.25 million, TikTok (19.3 million) and Instagram (13.9 million). For example, a recent study has reveal that TikTok has become an important social media platform for consumers in searching for tourism services (Deng et al., 2022). TikTok, which offer a short time frame videos are able to describe narrative stories, thus offer consumers a sense of presence, thereby enhancing overall brand image and consumer purchasing behavior (Cao et al., 2021). Therefore, this study has proposed to examine the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) traits which comprises of credibility, authenticity and expertise, and trustworthiness as mediating variable to the consumer purchasing behavior towards online products on TikTok platform.

**Problem Statement**

The question of how social media influencer marketing can be measured is a major topic in social media research, especially in terms of the impact an influencer has on consumer behavior. Common metrics used to assess the impact of an influencer such as the number of followers or the number of interactions with a post, remain questionable as to what extent these metrics are suitable to estimate the impact or quality of an influencer (Grave & Greff, 2018). Furthermore, the higher the number of followers of an influencer does not always indicate their actual social power, so identifying the best influencer characteristics to influence consumer is challenging (Shirehpazazari, 2019). Social media influencer is prevalent in firm strategies, yet little is known about the factors that drive success of online brand engagement at different stages of the consumer purchase behavior (Hughes et al., 2019). Studies have shown that social media influencers are more likely to influence consumer purchasing behavior (Jin et al., 2019). Several studies have founded a positive significant relationship between influencer attributes and consumer purchasing behavior. A study by Wei et al., (2021) has founded that influencer attributes such as expertise, attractiveness, and similarity has a significant influence on the consumer purchase intention, while the other two variables tested was not significant which is trustworthiness and respect. Another study by Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2019) examined the relevance of influencers' attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness in online campaigns and found that trustworthiness followed by attractiveness were the strongest components of brand loyalty and trust that led to purchasing intention. However, the relevance of expertise was insignificant. However, the results of another study by AlFarraj et al. (2021) revealed that influencer attractiveness and expertise had a significant impact on customers' engagement. The study found that the

influencers' attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were not significant predictors of purchasing intention. This shows that the results from past studies are not consistent. The literature review shows the importance of social media influencers is growing in demand. However, in addition to the inconsistent results shown by past studies, there is a need of studies that have examined the impact of social media influencers' traits on consumer purchasing behavior. This study aims to fill the gap by examining the impact of the social media influencers (SMIs) traits by exploring whether social media influencers' credibility, authenticity, and expertise influence the consumer purchasing behavior towards online products. Besides, as competition intensifies, business and organizations are having a harder time identifying genuine influencers with a sizable following (Chan, 2022). Moreover, majority of the research done focuses on social media platforms and their effectiveness in influencing consumers' attitudes and their purchase intentions, but not on the influencers' traits (Hoo et al., 2022). Hence, the need to close the gap in the matter of social media influencers' traits influencing the consumers' attitudes and their purchasing behavior. Hence, this study will focus on the consumer purchasing behavior towards online products on TikTok platform. In addition to the theoretical contribution, this study will provide a better understanding to consumers and marketers on the impact of social media influencers' traits towards consumer purchasing behavior by including trustworthiness as a mediator to the relationship.

### **Research Objectives**

RO1: To examine the impact of social media influencers' traits on consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

RO2: To evaluate the influence of trustworthiness as a mediator of social media influencers' traits and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: Does social media influencers' traits has an impact on consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform?

RQ2: How does trustworthiness mediate the relationship between the social media influencers' traits and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform?

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Underpinning Theories***

Rationally, a lot of factors influence how we react to a situation or make a decision. Similarly, consumers make purchasing decisions based on range of factors, such as their personalities and interests, as well as market impulses. By understanding consumers' behaviour when purchasing certain products or services, it can assist in creating the right marketing strategies geared toward these buying habits and subsequently increase sales. According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), consumer action or behaviour is described by his or her behavioural intentions. Consumer's attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms all influence their behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 1991). As a result, a consumer's behavioural intentions reflect how determined or powerful that individual is to engage in or execute a given behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Past studies have shown that social media influencers can affect the behaviour intention of consumers (Taillon et al., 2020; Chetioui, Benlafqih, and Lebdaoui, 2020; Wiedman and Mettenheim, 2019). The Source-Credibility Model, first proposed by Hovland et al., (1982) and later modified by Ohanian (1990), can be used to analyze the sources or components associated with social media influencers. This

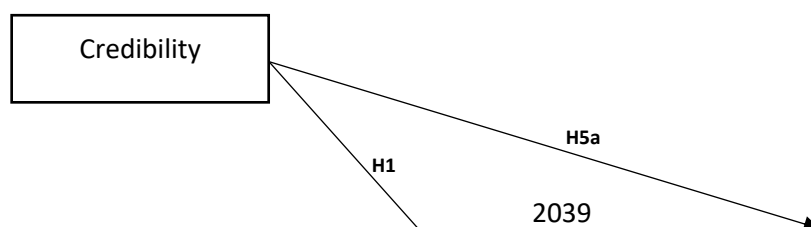
model focused on the credibility of the social media influences specifically on the aspects of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Owing to the number of followers they have (De Veirman et al., 2017) and the reputation they have built in specific areas or fields (Kim et al., 2017), social media influencers play an important role in marketing, particularly in attracting and persuading their followers to purchase items. The social media influencers' engagement and interactions enable them to connect the brands with the customers (De Vries et al., 2012). They become more influential due to the interaction and reactions from the followers on their endorsements and posts on social media and blogs (Arora et al., 2019). Study by Ki and Kim (2019) found that social media influencers' attractiveness, prestige, expertise, informativeness and interactive contents influence the attitude and intention to purchase. While, study by Chetioui, Benlafqih, and Lebdaoui (2020) revealed that perceived credibility, trust, perceived behavioral control, perceived subjective norms, perceived expertise, and perceived congruence had a positive and significant association with attitudes and purchase intention. According to Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2019), only the influencer's trustworthiness, followed by attractiveness, has a favorable and significant association to brand loyalty and purchasing intention. On the contrary, AlFarraj et al. (2021) discovered that the attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise of influencers had no effect on purchasing intention. This demonstrates that the findings of previous investigations are inconsistent.

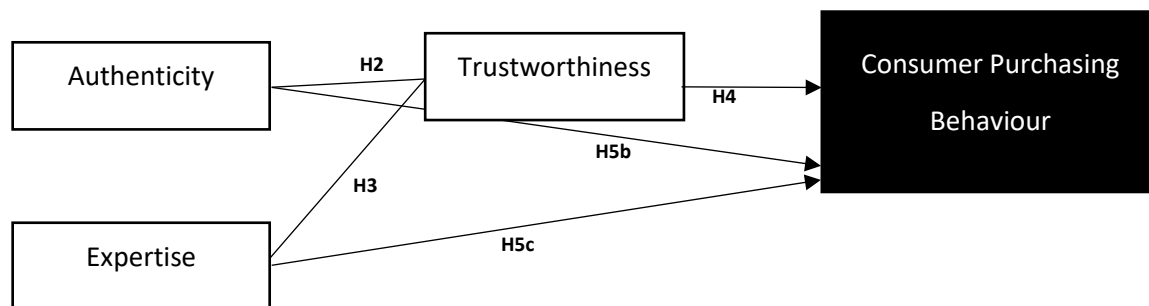
### ***Social Media Influencers (SMIs) Traits***

The evolution of social media platforms as the medium of marketing also influences the growth of social media influencers (Saima & Khan, 2020). According to Sokolova & Kefi (2020), social media influencers refers to the social media users who have built an engaged community by creating and sharing content based on their knowledge and expertise. Other definition by Xiao et al., (2018) stated that SMIs as a viral marketing approach that an online personality shapes consumers' attitude through tweets, posts, blogs, or any other formats of communication on social media. Generally, SMIs engage their followers through interactive content marketing such as videos, audios, images, copywriting, and live interactions (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Occasionally, social media influencers impact on the follower's attitudes and decisions have made them a universal marketing phenomenon since they have a significant positive impact on the buying decision of consumers (Phua, et al., 2017). With social media influencer marketing, consumers listen the messages that brands want to share though the voice of a peer or someone they admire (Botelho, 2020). In addition, social media influencers act as digital opinion leader, are able to influence the buying attitudes, decisions and behaviors of their audience of followers (Veirman et al., 2017).

### **Proposed Conceptual framework**

The proposed conceptual framework for this study is depicted in Figure 1 below. It shows the relationship between social media influencers' traits: credibility, authenticity and expertise to the consumer purchasing behavior on TikTok platform with the mediation of trustworthiness variable.





**Figure 1** Proposed Conceptual Framework

### Hypotheses Development

Several hypotheses were created based on the literature review and related theories as discussed before. These hypotheses focus on the impact of the social media influencer (SMIs) traits on the consumer purchasing behavior on TikTok platform, with the mediation of trustworthiness. Details of the hypotheses development are presented as follows:

#### ***Relationship between Credibility Traits with Trustworthiness***

Nam and Dan (2018) suggested that credibility is one of the most important factors when people select influencers. Besides, Lagner and Eisend (2011) confirmed that an influencer's credibility would have a much longer effect on the consumer behaviour toward a brand or product. Ohanian (1990) defined credibility as factors such as likability and expertise that can make a person more likely to be believed. To investigate the influencer's credibility impacts their follower attitude and also refer to a study of source credibility and trustworthiness will improve the relationship between online consumers (Ma et al., 2021). The level of trust people have in person delivering a message influences how they perceive and interpret what is being said. A study by McCormick (2016) have demonstrated that consumer's intentions to buy products and their attitudes towards brands can be affected by how credible the endorser appears to them. Therefore, this study attempts to measure the relationship between credibility and trustworthiness on consumer purchasing behaviour by proposing the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between credibility and trustworthiness on consumer purchasing behaviour for online products on TikTok platform.

#### ***Relationship between Authenticity Traits with Trustworthiness***

SMIs are seen as authentic and authenticity of SMIs increases the perceived trustworthiness of SMIs (Karaila, 2021). According to Duffy (2017), authenticity can be defined as expressing, speaking and otherwise communicating in a manner that it relevant to the subculture one wishes to be a part of and engage with. Authenticity aims to encourage trust through content that appears to be unscripted, spontaneous, ordinary and imperfect, and authenticity talk involves speaking in a real, spontaneous, conversational mode that does not appear scripted or rehearsed and appears to be true to oneself (Enli, 2016). SMIs can present themselves as authentic through ordinariness and authenticity routines, which could involve showing themselves as uncertain, humble, concerned about their perception like an ordinary person would and not as a confident part of the media industry (Dekavalla, 2020). SMIs maintain the authenticity and trustworthiness, that they have built over the years, when they grow larger



and gain popularity within their communities (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Moreover, authenticity is a critical factor in building trust for influencers (Leparoux, Minier and Anand, 2019). Interestingly, a study claims that because of the perceived authenticity and thus trustworthiness of SMIs, consumers are no longer able to distinguish real and honest opinions within the commercial content on social media (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). Overall, it seems that SMIs are perceived as authentic and the authenticity of SMIs increases trustworthiness. Therefore, this study attempts to measure the relationship between authenticity and trustworthiness on consumer purchasing behaviour by proposing the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between authenticity and trustworthiness on consumer purchasing behaviour for online products on TikTok platform.

### ***Relationship between Expertise Traits with Trustworthiness***

Sokolova and Kefi (2020) defined expertise as a person's knowledge and experience in a certain given domain. The expertise of SMI is characterized by genuineness and elegance as they display innate ability in their field rather than external motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Smith et al., (2005) stated that an influencer's expertise increases consumers trust and, as a result, influences their attitudes toward purchase intention. Jean et.al (2019) also agreed that the expertise of the influencer has a substantial impact on customer purchase intention. Furthermore, followers differentiate the influencers based on their expertise and reject SMIs who lack expertise on the brands they promote (Moulard et al., 2015). The SMI's expertise increases followers' perceived trust, which may lead to a more favourable attitude towards the brands used or endorsed by the influencer (Lou and Yuan, 2019). However, study by Schouten et al., (2020) shown that influencer endorsements relate to influencer's trustworthiness but not on expertise. It was learned that influencer's expertise was not a significant predictor of purchasing intention (Weidmann and Mettenheim, 2019). Thus, this study attempts to find answers concerning the influence of influencer's expertise and trustworthiness on consumer purchasing behavior by proposing the following hypothesis:

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between expertise and trustworthiness on consumer purchasing behaviour for online products on TikTok platform.

### ***Relationship between Trustworthiness and Consumer Purchasing Behavior***

Trustworthiness is one of the elements specified in the Source Credibility Model. Based on the model, trustworthiness impacts the effectiveness of an endorsement by a celebrity or influencer. Previous study by Erdogan (1999) revealed that the trustworthiness is associated with the influencer's perceived honesty, dependability, and reliability. The result indicates that the influencer endorsements of products is vital, and the marketers must use influencers who are ranked highly based on the attributes. Other past studies also shown that trustworthiness have a significant impact on consumer purchasing behaviour (Weismueller et al., 2020; Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018; Wiedmann and Mettenheim, 2021). For example, a study by Weismueller et al. (2020) involving 306 samples from Instagram users showed that trustworthiness has a positive significant impact for purchasing intention by consumers. Another study by Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2021) founded that trustworthiness has the strongest impact of consumer intention to purchase products and services. In addition, Chetoui, Benlafqih and Lebdaoui (2020) also revealed that there is a significant impact of the trustworthiness and credibility of to influence the consumers' buying attitude as well as purchasing behaviour. Nonetheless, several studies have found that the trustworthiness was

not a significant to the purchasing behaviour (AlFarraj et al., 2021), for example, a study by Lou and Yuan (2018) discovered an insignificant influence of the trustworthiness towards consumer brand awareness and purchase intention. Similarly, a study by Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) did not find a significant effect of the influencer's trustworthiness on purchase intention. All in all, it can be concluded that past studies generally revealed a positive and significant relationship between trustworthiness and consumer purchasing behaviour, but some studies differed. Therefore, this study attempts to measure the relationship between trustworthiness and consumer purchasing behaviour by proposing the following hypothesis:

H4: There is a significant positive relationship between trustworthiness and customer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

#### ***Relationship between Social Media Influencers Traits and Consumer Purchasing Behavior***

Numerous past studies have examined the social media influencers traits and their impact on consumer behaviour such as brand awareness, loyalty, engagement and participation, willingness to pay more, positive word of mouth, and repeat purchase (e.g. Hamid et al., 2022; AlFarraj et al., 2021; Wiedmann and Mettenheim, 2021; Chetioui et al., 2020; Lou and Yan, 2018; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018; etc.). Additionally, a study by Kim (2022) has stated that SMIs have the ability to influence consumer satisfaction. Most research found that all of these consequences have direct relationship to the SMIs traits discussed previously. For instance, trustworthiness, attractiveness, credibility and similarity significantly predicts consumers' brand awareness and intention to purchase (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Since these traits and consequences are not universal, it is crucial for marketers to carefully select an influencers as their brand endorser by mapping these favourable attributes to their product, brand and strategic aims to ensure they are coherent and thus produce desired impacts to the target consumers (Chopra et al. 2021). Despite the spike on published studies in recent years, Hudders et al. (2021) suggest that research on SMI is still at infancy stage. Therefore, this study attempts to measure the relationship between social media influencers' traits, namely: credibility, authenticity, and expertise on consumer purchasing behaviour by proposing the following hypotheses:

H5a: There is a significant positive relationship between credibility and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

H5b: There is a significant positive relationship between authenticity and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

H5a: There is a significant positive relationship between expertise and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

#### ***The Mediating Effect of Trustworthiness on the relationship between Social Media Influencers Traits and Consumer Purchasing Behavior***

An influencer basically performed the role of a communicator for a particular brand that he or she endorsed. As a communicator, the influencer needs to acts with integrity and be believable. According to Edorgan (1999), both integrity and believability are keys in being a communicator. Both elements showcase trustworthiness of the influencers. Trustworthiness is vital in the sphere of SMI advertising as it directly influences and affects the consumer's decisions about the promoted products and SMIs' commercial offerings in general (Balaban and Mustăţea, 2019). SMIs need to demonstrate their trustworthiness to effectively endorse products and services (Schouten et al., 2020). The perceived trustworthiness of the

source/influencer is seen to be a major factor that determines subsequent behaviour of the consumers/followers (Berger, 2014). According to Campbell and Marks (2015), there is a positive relationship between blogger's trustworthiness and followers' attitudes toward the brand. A lack of openness in SMI advertising may obscure the advertiser's intent to persuade and may be interpreted as an attempt to manipulate followers' trust (Campbell and Marks, 2015). Previous studies have demonstrated that when bloggers disclose sponsorships it can influence behavioural intentions such as purchase intention, continued interest in the blogger (Liljander et al., 2015), and the credibility of the blogger, measured as trust (Colliander and Erlandsson, 2015). Recent studies on SMI advertising have also reported the positive indirect effects of advertising disclosure on brand attitude, which is subsequently mediated by ad recognition, scepticism, and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2019). The latter is a concept that is close to trustworthiness, according to the SMI source credibility approach (Hudders et al., 2021). Furthermore, mediated by affective advertising literacy via SMIs' trustworthiness and via social interaction, advertising disclosure has been found to have a positive impact on adolescents' behavioural intentions (De Jans et al., 2018). Based on the aforementioned arguments, this study attempts to measure the mediating effect of trustworthiness between the social media influencer traits and consumer purchasing behaviour by proposing the following hypothesis

H6a: Trustworthiness has a mediating effect between credibility and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

H6b: Trustworthiness has a mediating effect between authenticity and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

H6c: Trust has a mediating effect between expertise and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

## **Conclusion**

This study propose to investigate the influence of social media influencer (SMI) traits on consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform. First, the result of this study will provide an answer to the first research question, that is, to examine the impact of social media influencers' traits on consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform. The Source-Credibility Model by Hovland et al., (1982) focused on the credibility of the social media influences specifically on the aspect of trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. Based on the model and literature from previous studies, this study attempts to extend the model by proposing three independent variables as the SMI traits that comprises of credibility, authenticity, and expertise. Given the second research question, this study tries to explore new relationship by evaluating the influence of trustworthiness as a mediator of social media influencers' traits and consumer purchasing behavior for online products on TikTok platform.

Besides that, this research have been contributed to the theoretical findings by understanding whether trustworthiness has a mediating effect between the proposed SMI traits and the consumer purchasing behavior. Theoretically, this study has developed a proposed a new conceptual framework that leads to a better understanding of the influence of the social media influencers traits on the consumer purchasing behavior for online product on TikTok platform. The study also contributes in enhancing knowledge of mediating role played by trustworthiness between the SMI traits and the consumer purchasing behavior. For managerial implications, the study has potential implications for both the SMIs and the managers or businesses who recruit influencers for endorsing their products. For the



influencers, they need to develop their personal strategies by not only focusing on their physical look or style, but to enhance their credibility, authenticity, and expertise with their followers. They need to develop those attributes which can strengthen trust thus resulting to a positive purchasing behavior for the followers. As discussed in the problem statement, businesses are facing with difficulties in determining which influencer to choose to market their products, knowing that the influencers' attributes can affect consumer purchasing behavior. As such, this study provide insights into understanding the influencer traits influence on consumer purchasing behavior, which enable the businesses to pay more attention to the right approaches in selecting influencers for their products.

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