



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND
MANAGEMENT PRACTICES
(IJEMP)

www.gaexcellence.com/ijemp



**MICRO-INFLUENCER PROFESSIONALISM AND
CONSUMER TRUST IN MALAYSIAN COSMETIC SMES:
EVIDENCE FROM INSTAGRAM USERS**

Firdaus Hamdi Noor Mohd^{1*}, Wan Nadhra Ixora Wan Kamarulbaharin², Muhammad Hisyam Zakaria³, Nasaie Zainuddin⁴

¹Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia

 fizyillustrations@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8195-9025>

¹Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia

 wannadhraixora@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7141-6772>

¹Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia

 mdhisyam@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8162-0417>

¹Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia

 nasaie@uitm.edu.my

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5247-2072>

*Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 26.03.2026

Revised date: 08.04.2026

Accepted date: 30.04.2026

Published date: 08.06.2026

To cite this document:

Mohd, F. H. M., Kamarulbaharin, W. N. I. W., Zakaria, M. H., & Zainuddin, N. (2026). Micro-Influencer Professionalism and Consumer Trust in Malaysian Cosmetic SMEs: Evidence from Instagram Users. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices*, 9(34), 203-226.

Abstract:

The increasing reliance on influencer marketing has created new opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to promote products through social media platforms. However, the effectiveness of influencer promotions depends largely on how consumers perceive the professionalism and credibility of the influencer presenting the promotional content. This study investigates the relationship between perceived micro-influencer professionalism and consumer responses toward SME cosmetic brands promoted on Instagram. A quantitative survey design was employed, and data were collected from 100 Malaysian social media users who regularly engage with influencer-generated promotional content. The study examined multiple dimensions of influencer professionalism, including content accuracy, demonstration quality, transparency disclosure, professionalism and brand alignment, message consistency, engagement quality, influencer trustworthiness, and ethical expectations. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to evaluate the relationships between these constructs and two consumer outcome variables: brand perception and purchase intention. The results indicate that all examined professionalism constructs demonstrate statistically significant positive relationships with both brand perception and purchase intention ($p < 0.001$). Demonstration quality and influencer

trustworthiness were found to have the strongest relationships with brand perception, while ethical expectations and demonstration quality showed the strongest associations with purchase intention. These findings suggest that professional influencer communication plays a critical role in shaping consumer trust and behavioural responses in digital marketing environments. The study provides practical insights for SMEs seeking to enhance the effectiveness of influencer collaborations by prioritising professionalism and credibility in promotional strategies.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEMP.9340013 **Keyword:**

Brand Perception, Influencer Professionalism, Instagram Marketing, Micro-Influencer Marketing, Purchase Intention, SME Branding



© The authors (2026). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact ijemp@gaexcellence.com.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has significantly transformed contemporary marketing practices, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that rely on cost-effective digital strategies to promote their products and services. Among these strategies, influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant approach for reaching targeted audiences through social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, presenting promotional content in formats that are perceived as more relatable and authentic than traditional advertising. For SMEs operating in competitive industries such as cosmetics and skincare, influencer collaborations offer an accessible pathway to increase product visibility and build consumer trust within digital marketplaces.

The cosmetic industry represents a particularly relevant context for influencer marketing research because consumer purchasing decisions are frequently influenced by perceived product safety, credibility, and authenticity. Unlike many consumer goods, cosmetic products involve personal health considerations and potential physical effects, such as allergic reactions or skin irritation. Consequently, consumers often experience higher levels of perceived risk when evaluating cosmetic products online. When direct product evaluation is not possible, consumers rely on external cues such as influencer recommendations, peer reviews, and brand reputation to form judgements about product quality and reliability. In this environment, the professionalism of influencers becomes an important factor shaping how consumers interpret promotional messages and assess the credibility of the endorsed brand.

Micro-influencers, typically defined as social media users with smaller but highly engaged follower communities, have become increasingly attractive partners for SMEs due to their

perceived authenticity and niche audience connections. Compared with celebrity influencers, micro-influencers often maintain closer relationships with their followers and are perceived as more trustworthy and relatable. This perceived authenticity can enhance audience engagement and increase the persuasive effectiveness of promotional content. However, the effectiveness of micro-influencer marketing is not solely determined by follower count or audience reach. Instead, the professionalism demonstrated by influencers in their promotional activities plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and responses.

Professionalism in influencer marketing can manifest through several observable behaviours and content characteristics. These include the accuracy of product information presented in promotional posts, the clarity of product demonstrations, transparent disclosure of sponsorship relationships, consistency in messaging, and ethical presentation of promotional claims. When influencers communicate in a professional and responsible manner, consumers may perceive the endorsed products as more credible and trustworthy. Conversely, poorly executed promotional content or misleading product claims may reduce consumer confidence and negatively affect brand perception.

Existing research on influencer marketing has emphasised the importance of credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity as determinants of consumer persuasion and purchasing behaviour. Influencer credibility has been linked to increased consumer engagement, stronger brand attitudes, and higher purchase intentions across various digital marketing contexts. However, much of the existing literature has focused on influencer popularity or parasocial relationships rather than the specific professional behaviours that contribute to credibility formation. As a result, there remains a need for empirical research examining how distinct dimensions of influencer professionalism influence consumer perception and behavioural outcomes, particularly within SME marketing environments.

Recent developments in digital marketing research indicate that influencer marketing has evolved into a complex ecosystem involving credibility signals, audience engagement mechanisms, and trust-building strategies that influence consumer decision-making processes. Social media influencers function not only as promotional intermediaries but also as opinion leaders who shape how consumers interpret product information in online environments. Lou and Yuan (2019) emphasise that influencer credibility plays a significant role in shaping brand attitudes and purchase intention, particularly when followers perceive the influencer as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Similarly, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) found that influencer characteristics such as perceived expertise and authenticity significantly affect consumer responses to sponsored content. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns is closely tied to how audiences evaluate the professionalism and credibility of influencers delivering promotional messages. For SMEs operating in highly competitive industries such as cosmetics and skincare, establishing credibility through influencer partnerships may therefore be essential for gaining consumer trust and improving brand visibility within digital marketplaces.

This research gap is especially relevant in the Malaysian cosmetic SME sector, where smaller brands often compete with established international companies while operating with limited marketing resources. SMEs frequently collaborate with micro-influencers as a cost-effective strategy to build brand awareness and establish legitimacy among consumers. While influencer marketing campaigns are widely used by these businesses, limited empirical research has examined which aspects of influencer professionalism most strongly influence consumer

evaluations of SME cosmetic brands. Understanding these relationships is important for SMEs seeking to optimise influencer partnerships and enhance the credibility of their marketing communications.

Accordingly, this study investigates the relationship between perceived micro-influencer professionalism and consumer responses toward SME cosmetic brands promoted on Instagram. Using survey data collected from Malaysian social media users, the study examines how various professionalism-related attributes of influencer promotional content influence two key consumer outcomes: brand perception and purchase intention. By analysing these relationships through Pearson correlation analysis, the study aims to identify which dimensions of influencer professionalism most strongly contribute to positive consumer evaluations of SME cosmetic products.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the broader literature on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour by clarifying how professionalism functions as a credibility-enhancing mechanism within digital promotional environments. While existing studies have emphasised the role of influencer popularity or social attractiveness, the present study highlights the importance of professional communication practices in shaping consumer trust and perception. The findings therefore extend understanding of influencer credibility by identifying specific behavioural attributes that influence consumer responses within social media marketing contexts.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for SMEs seeking to improve the effectiveness of influencer collaborations. By identifying the professionalism attributes that most strongly influence consumer perception and purchase intention, SME marketers can develop clearer guidelines for selecting influencers and designing promotional campaigns. Such insights are particularly relevant for cosmetic SMEs operating in competitive online environments where consumer trust and perceived product credibility are essential for successful brand positioning.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on influencer professionalism, consumer trust, and brand perception within social media marketing contexts. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and survey design. The results section then presents the statistical analysis examining the relationships between influencer professionalism constructs and consumer outcomes. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections interpret the findings and outline theoretical and practical implications for SME influencer marketing strategies.

Literature Review

Influencer Marketing in SME Branding

The expansion of social media platforms has transformed how businesses communicate with consumers, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that rely on cost-efficient promotional strategies. Influencer marketing has become a widely adopted approach in digital branding, enabling firms to leverage the credibility and audience reach of social media personalities to promote products and services. Influencers function as opinion leaders who can shape consumer attitudes, increase brand awareness, and influence purchasing behaviour through the content they share with their followers.

For SMEs, influencer collaborations offer several advantages compared with traditional advertising channels. Influencers typically operate within niche communities where followers share specific interests, allowing brands to reach more targeted audiences. Research has shown that influencer marketing can generate stronger engagement rates than conventional advertising because followers often perceive influencer recommendations as more authentic and relatable (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In addition, influencer-generated content tends to blend seamlessly with everyday social media communication, which reduces resistance to promotional messaging and increases consumer receptiveness.

Within the cosmetic and skincare industries, influencer marketing has become particularly influential because product evaluation often relies on visual demonstration and experiential feedback. Consumers frequently turn to influencers for product reviews, application tutorials, and personal recommendations before making purchasing decisions. As a result, influencers can significantly shape consumer perceptions of product credibility and effectiveness (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). For SME cosmetic brands that lack strong brand recognition, influencer endorsements may therefore serve as an important mechanism for building consumer trust and legitimacy in competitive digital marketplaces.

However, while influencer marketing offers substantial benefits for SMEs, its effectiveness depends on the perceived credibility of the influencer and the quality of the promotional content produced. Poorly executed promotional posts or misleading endorsements may undermine consumer confidence and negatively affect brand perception. Consequently, understanding the professional attributes that contribute to effective influencer marketing has become an important research area within digital marketing and consumer behaviour studies.

Micro-Influencer Professionalism

Micro-influencers are commonly defined as social media users with relatively smaller follower bases, typically ranging from several thousand to around one hundred thousand followers. Despite having smaller audiences compared with celebrity influencers, micro-influencers often achieve higher engagement rates due to their closer relationships with followers and more specialised content niches. This perceived authenticity has made micro-influencers attractive partners for SMEs seeking to reach specific consumer segments while maintaining marketing cost efficiency (Abidin, 2016).

Professionalism in influencer marketing refers to the degree to which influencers present promotional content in a responsible, transparent, and credible manner. Professional influencer behaviour may include providing accurate product information, demonstrating product usage clearly, maintaining consistency in messaging, and disclosing sponsored relationships when applicable. These behaviours contribute to the overall perception that an influencer operates with integrity and professionalism, which can strengthen consumer trust in the endorsed product or brand.

Content accuracy is a particularly important dimension of influencer professionalism. Consumers rely on influencer posts as informal sources of product information, especially in industries where product performance cannot be easily verified before purchase. When influencers provide accurate and detailed descriptions of product features, ingredients, or usage instructions, consumers may perceive the content as more informative and reliable. Conversely,

exaggerated or misleading claims may reduce credibility and lead to scepticism among followers.

Product demonstration quality also contributes to professionalism by helping consumers understand how a product functions in real-world contexts. In the cosmetic sector, influencers frequently demonstrate product application techniques, visual results, and usage routines. Clear demonstrations can reduce consumer uncertainty by allowing potential buyers to observe how a product performs during use. Studies have suggested that visual product demonstrations can enhance consumer understanding and strengthen purchase intention by reducing perceived risk (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Transparency and disclosure represent another key component of professional influencer behaviour. Regulatory guidelines in many countries require influencers to disclose sponsored content to ensure transparency in advertising practices. Transparent disclosure can improve consumer trust by signalling honesty and ethical marketing behaviour. When influencers openly acknowledge promotional partnerships, audiences may perceive the communication as more authentic and trustworthy rather than deceptive or manipulative.

Additional elements of professionalism include message consistency, engagement quality, and ethical presentation of promotional claims. Influencers who maintain consistent messaging across posts are more likely to be perceived as credible and dependable communicators. Similarly, meaningful engagement with followers through comments, responses, and interactive communication can strengthen parasocial relationships and increase audience loyalty. Ethical promotional behaviour, including avoidance of exaggerated claims or misleading endorsements, further contributes to positive perceptions of influencer integrity.

Recent research has further highlighted that professionalism in influencer communication can significantly influence consumer perceptions of authenticity and credibility. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) observed that consumers tend to trust influencers who present content in a transparent and relatable manner, particularly when influencers demonstrate genuine experience with the promoted product. Similarly, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) reported that perceived influencer credibility and transparency positively affect consumer attitudes toward sponsored posts on social media platforms. Professional communication practices such as accurate product descriptions, honest evaluations, and transparent disclosure of sponsored content contribute to building long-term trust between influencers and their audiences. In contrast, deceptive or exaggerated promotional practices may undermine influencer credibility and weaken the persuasive impact of marketing messages. These findings reinforce the importance of examining professionalism-related attributes of influencer content as determinants of consumer trust and behavioural responses in digital marketing environments.

Consumer Trust and Brand Perception

Trust plays a central role in consumer decision-making processes, particularly in online environments where information asymmetry and uncertainty are common. In digital marketplaces, consumers frequently rely on external cues to evaluate the credibility of products and brands. Influencers can serve as such cues because they function as intermediaries who interpret and present product information to audiences in a more relatable format.

Brand perception refers to the overall impression consumers form about a brand based on available information, experiences, and external signals. Influencer endorsements can

significantly shape brand perception by associating the promoted product with the influencer's personal credibility and reputation. When consumers trust an influencer, they may transfer this trust to the endorsed brand, resulting in more favourable evaluations of product quality and reliability (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

Research in influencer marketing has consistently demonstrated that perceived influencer credibility positively influences consumer attitudes toward advertised products. Influencers who are perceived as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and authentic tend to generate stronger persuasive effects. These characteristics contribute to consumer confidence in the promotional message and reduce scepticism toward marketing claims (Ohanian, 1990).

For SME cosmetic brands, positive brand perception is especially important because smaller firms often lack established reputations compared with multinational competitors. Influencer collaborations can therefore serve as credibility-building mechanisms by associating the SME brand with trusted social media personalities. If influencer professionalism enhances perceptions of reliability and authenticity, consumers may become more receptive to the endorsed product and develop more favourable brand attitudes.

Purchase Intention in Influencer Marketing

Purchase intention refers to a consumer's willingness or likelihood to purchase a product following exposure to marketing stimuli. It is commonly used as a behavioural indicator in consumer research because it reflects the extent to which consumers consider a product as a potential purchase option. Within influencer marketing contexts, purchase intention often emerges as the outcome of a chain of psychological processes involving credibility evaluation, trust formation, and brand perception.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour suggests that behavioural intentions are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In digital marketing environments, influencer endorsements can shape consumer attitudes toward products by presenting persuasive messages that highlight product benefits and social approval. When followers perceive influencers as credible and trustworthy, they may be more inclined to accept the promotional message and consider purchasing the endorsed product.

Previous studies have found that influencer credibility positively affects purchase intention through mechanisms such as trust, engagement, and perceived authenticity. For instance, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencer credibility significantly enhances brand attitudes and purchase intention among social media users. Similarly, De Veirman et al. (2017) demonstrated that influencer characteristics influence consumer perceptions of brand value and purchase likelihood.

In the context of SME cosmetic marketing, purchase intention may be particularly sensitive to perceived professionalism in influencer content. Consumers evaluating skincare or cosmetic products often seek reassurance regarding product safety, effectiveness, and reliability. Professional influencer presentations that provide accurate information, transparent communication, and ethical promotion may therefore strengthen consumer confidence and increase willingness to purchase the product.

Hypothesis Development

Based on the preceding literature, influencer professionalism can be conceptualised as a multidimensional construct encompassing several observable behavioural attributes. These attributes include content accuracy, demonstration quality, transparency and disclosure, professionalism and brand alignment, message consistency, engagement quality, influencer trustworthiness, and ethical expectations. Each of these dimensions may influence how consumers evaluate influencer-promoted brands and whether they develop purchase intentions toward the endorsed products.

Professional influencer behaviour can strengthen consumer trust by reducing uncertainty and improving the credibility of promotional content. When consumers perceive influencer content as accurate, transparent, and professionally presented, they may form more favourable perceptions of the endorsed brand. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed regarding the relationship between influencer professionalism constructs and brand perception:

- H1: Content accuracy positively influences brand perception.
- H2: Demonstration quality positively influences brand perception.
- H3: Transparency and disclosure positively influence brand perception.
- H4: Professionalism and brand alignment positively influence brand perception.
- H5: Message consistency positively influences brand perception.
- H6: Engagement quality positively influences brand perception.
- H7: Influencer trustworthiness positively influences brand perception.
- H8: Ethical expectations positively influence brand perception.

Similarly, professionalism attributes may influence consumers' behavioural responses by increasing confidence in the promoted product and reducing perceived risk. As consumers develop more favourable evaluations of the influencer and the promotional message, they may become more willing to purchase the endorsed product. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed regarding the relationship between influencer professionalism constructs and purchase intention:

- H9: Content accuracy positively influences purchase intention.
- H10: Demonstration quality positively influences purchase intention.
- H11: Transparency and disclosure positively influence purchase intention.
- H12: Professionalism and brand alignment positively influence purchase intention.
- H13: Message consistency positively influences purchase intention.
- H14: Engagement quality positively influences purchase intention.
- H15: Influencer trustworthiness positively influences purchase intention.
- H16: Ethical expectations positively influence purchase intention.

These hypotheses are empirically tested using survey data collected from Malaysian social media users who regularly engage with influencer content on Instagram.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to examine the relationship between perceived micro-influencer professionalism and consumer responses toward SME cosmetic brands promoted on Instagram. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from social media users who regularly engage with influencer-generated promotional content. Survey-based research is commonly applied in digital marketing studies to analyse consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions in online environments.

The research design focused on identifying the relationships between multiple dimensions of influencer professionalism and two key consumer outcome variables, namely brand perception and purchase intention. Pearson correlation analysis was used to evaluate the strength and significance of the relationships between the predictor constructs and the outcome variables. This analytical approach is appropriate for examining associations between variables measured using Likert-scale survey items and is widely used in social science research.

The constructs examined in this study represent observable attributes of influencer professionalism in promotional content. These include content accuracy, demonstration quality, transparency and disclosure, professionalism and brand alignment, message consistency, engagement quality, influencer trustworthiness, and ethical expectations. These constructs were analysed in relation to consumers' perceptions of SME cosmetic brands and their purchase intention toward the promoted products.

Participants and Sampling

Data were collected from Malaysian social media users who were familiar with influencer-generated promotional content on Instagram. Participants were recruited through online distribution of the questionnaire using social media platforms and digital communication channels. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were required to confirm that they had prior exposure to influencer content related to cosmetic or skincare products before completing the questionnaire.

A total of 100 valid responses were obtained and included in the final analysis. The demographic profile of respondents reflects a sample that is highly relevant to influencer marketing contexts. Female respondents constituted the majority of the sample (71%), while male respondents accounted for 29%. In terms of age distribution, the largest group of respondents was aged between 25 and 34 years (34%), followed by those aged 35 to 44 years (27%), respondents aged 45 years and above (20%), and respondents aged 18 to 24 years (19%).

Instagram usage among participants was relatively frequent, indicating that respondents were familiar with influencer-generated promotional content. Approximately 34% of respondents reported using Instagram several days per week, while 29% indicated daily usage. Regarding educational background, most respondents possessed a bachelor's degree (44%), followed by diploma qualifications (29%), secondary school education (16%), and postgraduate qualifications (11%). Geographically, more than half of respondents resided in Selangor (53%), followed by Kuala Lumpur (14%), Johor (8%), Perak (7%), and other Malaysian states (11%).

The demographic profile suggests that the respondents represent digitally active consumers who are likely to encounter influencer marketing content on social media platforms.

Survey Instrument and Measurement

The questionnaire was developed based on constructs derived from existing literature on influencer marketing, source credibility, and consumer behaviour. All constructs were measured using multiple items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale format allows respondents to indicate the degree to which they agree with statements related to influencer behaviour and consumer perceptions.

The survey instrument measured eight dimensions of perceived micro-influencer professionalism: content accuracy, demonstration quality, transparency and disclosure, professionalism and brand alignment, message consistency, engagement quality, influencer trustworthiness, and ethical expectations. Each construct consisted of three to six measurement items designed to capture different aspects of influencer promotional behaviour.

Content accuracy refers to the extent to which influencer posts provide correct and reliable information regarding product features, usage, and performance. Demonstration quality evaluates the clarity and effectiveness with which influencers demonstrate product usage in promotional content. Transparency and disclosure measure the extent to which influencers clearly communicate sponsorship relationships and promotional intent. Professionalism and brand alignment assess whether influencer behaviour and communication style align with the values and image of the endorsed brand.

Message consistency examines whether influencers maintain coherent and stable messaging across promotional posts, while engagement quality reflects the level of interaction and responsiveness between influencers and their audience. Influencer trustworthiness captures the perceived honesty and credibility of the influencer, and ethical expectations measure whether promotional content adheres to responsible and ethical communication practices.

In addition to these predictor constructs, two consumer outcome variables were measured. Brand perception evaluates respondents' overall evaluation of the SME cosmetic brand promoted by influencers, while purchase intention assesses the likelihood that respondents would consider purchasing the promoted product.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement constructs used in the survey instrument. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct to determine the extent to which the measurement items consistently represent the underlying variables. Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable for social science research.

The reliability results indicated strong internal consistency across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.849 to 0.934, indicating very good to excellent reliability levels. Engagement quality demonstrated the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.934$), followed by influencer trustworthiness ($\alpha = 0.929$) and message consistency ($\alpha = 0.910$). Other constructs such as content accuracy ($\alpha = 0.880$), transparency disclosure ($\alpha = 0.853$), and ethical expectations (α

= 0.849) also exceeded the recommended threshold. These results confirm that the measurement instrument is reliable and suitable for further statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the demographic characteristics of respondents and provide an overview of the measurement constructs. Pearson correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the relationships between influencer professionalism constructs and the consumer outcome variables of brand perception and purchase intention.

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the variables. Statistical significance was assessed using p-values to evaluate whether the observed relationships were meaningful. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used as the threshold for hypothesis testing. This analysis enabled the study to identify which dimensions of influencer professionalism have the strongest relationships with consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions toward SME cosmetic brands promoted on Instagram.

While Pearson correlation analysis is appropriate for examining the strength and direction of relationships between variables, it does not establish causal relationships. However, this approach is suitable for exploratory research aimed at identifying significant associations among constructs. The findings of this study therefore provide a foundational understanding of the relationships between influencer professionalism and consumer responses, which may be further examined using more advanced analytical techniques such as regression analysis or structural equation modelling in future research.

Results

Respondent Demographic Profile

A total of 100 valid responses were analysed in this study. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarised in the figures below. Figure 1 shows that female respondents constituted the majority of the sample, accounting for 71% of participants, while male respondents represented 29%. Figure 2 shows that the largest group of respondents falls within the 25–34 years age category (34%), followed by respondents aged 35–44 years (27%), respondents aged 45 years and above (20%), and respondents aged 18–24 years (19%).

The respondents also demonstrated relatively frequent engagement with Instagram, indicating familiarity with influencer-generated promotional content. Figure 3 shows approximately 34% of participants reported using Instagram several days per week, while 29% indicated daily usage. A further 18% reported using Instagram about once per week, while 19% reported rarely using the platform.

With regard to educational background, Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents possessed a bachelor's degree (44%), followed by diploma holders (29%). Secondary school graduates accounted for 16% of respondents, while 11% reported postgraduate qualifications. Geographically, Figure 5 shows more than half of the respondents were located in Selangor (53%), followed by Kuala Lumpur (14%), Johor (8%), Perak (7%), and other Malaysian states

(11%). The demographic distribution suggests that the sample consists primarily of digitally active consumers who are likely to encounter influencer marketing content on Instagram.

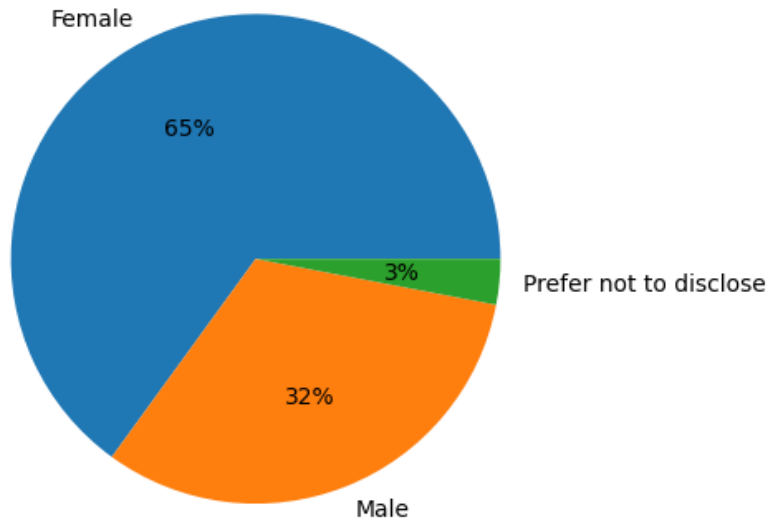


Figure 1: Gender Distribution

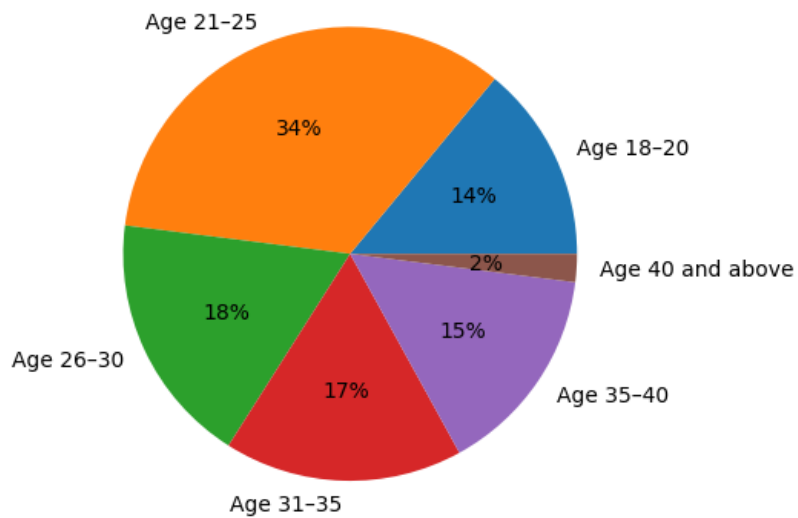


Figure 2: Age Distribution

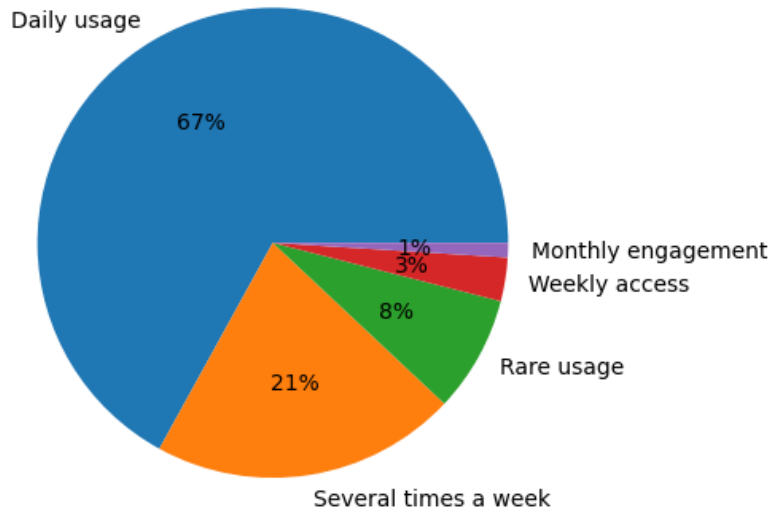


Figure 3: Instagram Engagement Levels

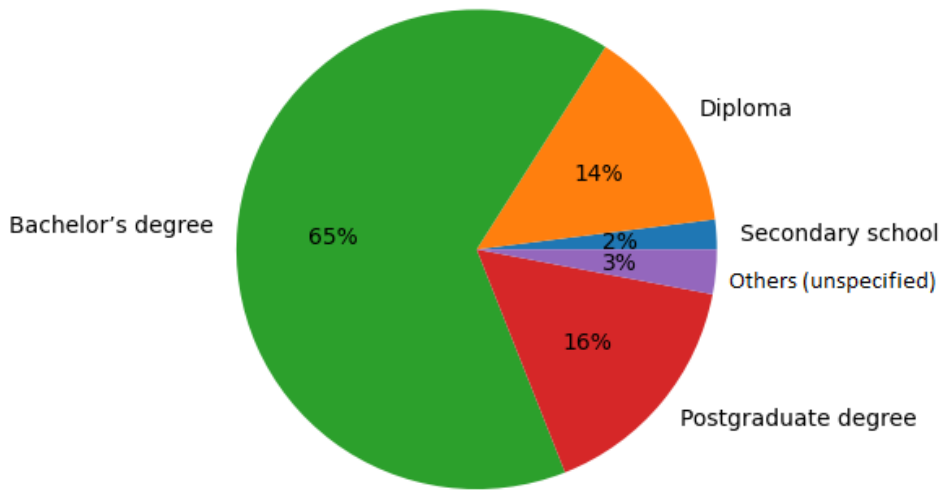


Figure 4: Education Level Distribution

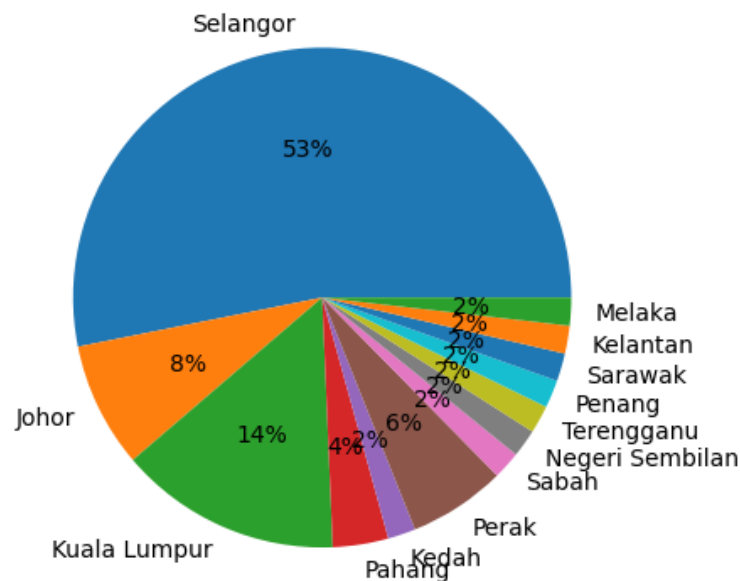


Figure 5: State of Residence Distribution

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the measurement constructs used in the survey instrument. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each construct to determine whether the measurement items reliably represent the underlying variables. Values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable for social science research.

The results of the reliability analysis indicate strong internal consistency across all constructs included in the study. As shown in Figure 6, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.849 to 0.934. The engagement quality construct demonstrated the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.934$), followed by influencer trustworthiness ($\alpha = 0.929$) and message consistency ($\alpha = 0.910$). Other constructs, including demonstration quality ($\alpha = 0.904$), professionalism and brand alignment ($\alpha = 0.900$), and content accuracy ($\alpha = 0.880$), also exhibited excellent reliability levels.

Similarly, transparency disclosure ($\alpha = 0.853$), purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.861$), and ethical expectations ($\alpha = 0.849$) demonstrated reliability levels well above the recommended threshold. These results indicate that the survey instrument exhibits strong internal consistency and that the measurement constructs are suitable for further statistical analysis.



Figure 6: Visual Representation of Cronbach's Alpha Values for All Measurement Constructs, Indicating Strong Internal Consistency Across the Survey Instrument

Pearson Correlation Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between micro-influencer professionalism constructs and the two consumer outcome variables: brand perception and purchase intention. The correlation coefficients and significance levels are presented in a form of a heatmap in Figure 7.

The results reveal that all influencer professionalism constructs demonstrate significant positive relationships with both brand perception and purchase intention at the $p < 0.001$ level. These findings indicate that higher levels of perceived influencer professionalism are associated with more favourable consumer perceptions and stronger purchase intentions toward SME cosmetic products promoted on Instagram.

Among the examined constructs, demonstration quality showed the strongest relationship with brand perception ($r = 0.821$), followed closely by influencer trustworthiness ($r = 0.813$). Content accuracy ($r = 0.779$), professionalism and brand alignment ($r = 0.768$), and message consistency ($r = 0.755$) also demonstrated strong positive correlations with brand perception. Ethical expectations ($r = 0.720$), engagement quality ($r = 0.711$), and transparency disclosure ($r = 0.699$) similarly exhibited significant positive relationships with brand perception.

In terms of purchase intention, ethical expectations demonstrated the strongest correlation ($r = 0.756$), indicating that consumers are more likely to consider purchasing influencer-promoted products when promotional content is perceived as ethically responsible. Demonstration quality also showed a strong relationship with purchase intention ($r = 0.704$), followed by influencer trustworthiness ($r = 0.698$) and professionalism and brand alignment ($r = 0.665$). Content accuracy ($r = 0.638$), message consistency ($r = 0.607$), engagement quality ($r = 0.594$),

and transparency disclosure ($r = 0.581$) also exhibited significant positive correlations with purchase intention.

Overall, the results support all sixteen hypotheses proposed in this study. The findings suggest that multiple dimensions of influencer professionalism contribute significantly to the formation of positive brand perceptions and increased purchase intention among consumers exposed to influencer-promoted SME cosmetic products.



Figure 7: Heatmap of Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Influencer Professionalism Constructs and Consumer Outcome Variables, Where Darker Shading Represents Stronger Positive Relationships

The heatmap provides a visual summary of the correlation strength, allowing for easier comparison of the relative influence of each professionalism construct on brand perception and purchase intention.

Discussion

Influence of Micro-Influencer Professionalism on Brand Perception

The findings of this study indicate that multiple dimensions of perceived micro-influencer professionalism significantly influence consumer perceptions of SME cosmetic brands promoted on Instagram. All professionalism constructs examined in the study demonstrated strong positive relationships with brand perception, suggesting that consumers evaluate influencer-endorsed brands not only based on the product itself but also on the perceived professionalism of the influencer presenting the promotional content.

Among the examined constructs, demonstration quality exhibited the strongest correlation with brand perception. This finding suggests that clear and effective product demonstrations play a critical role in shaping consumer evaluations of cosmetic products promoted through social media. In the context of skincare and cosmetic marketing, visual demonstrations allow consumers to observe product usage and potential outcomes, thereby reducing uncertainty and perceived risk associated with online purchases. When influencers present detailed and visually informative demonstrations, consumers may perceive the endorsed products as more credible and reliable.

Influencer trustworthiness also demonstrated a strong positive relationship with brand perception. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that the perceived credibility of a message source significantly influences consumer attitudes toward endorsed brands (Ohanian, 1990). When consumers perceive influencers as honest, reliable, and knowledgeable, they are more likely to transfer this trust to the promoted brand. For SME cosmetic brands that may lack strong brand recognition, influencer trustworthiness therefore becomes a crucial factor in establishing credibility and legitimacy in the marketplace.

Other professionalism attributes, including content accuracy, professionalism and brand alignment, and message consistency, also showed strong correlations with brand perception. These results suggest that consumers pay attention to the overall quality and coherence of influencer promotional communication. Accurate product information and consistent messaging contribute to perceptions that influencers are knowledgeable and responsible communicators, which in turn enhances the credibility of the endorsed brand.

Transparency and disclosure also demonstrated a positive relationship with brand perception. This finding supports the view that transparent communication regarding sponsorship relationships may enhance consumer trust rather than diminish it. When influencers clearly disclose promotional partnerships, consumers may perceive the communication as more honest and ethically responsible, which contributes to more favourable brand evaluations.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research emphasising the importance of credibility in influencer marketing effectiveness. Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrated that influencer credibility positively influences consumer attitudes toward sponsored brands and enhances purchase intention through trust-based mechanisms. Similarly, De Veirman et al. (2017) reported that perceived influencer authenticity can significantly strengthen consumer engagement and brand perception within social media environments. These studies support the argument that influencer professionalism functions as a credibility signal that reduces consumer uncertainty during online product evaluation. When influencers present promotional content in a clear, informative, and ethically responsible manner, consumers may interpret these behaviours as indicators of trustworthiness and expertise. As a result, professional influencer communication can strengthen consumer confidence in the promoted brand and enhance overall brand perception.

Influence of Influencer Professionalism on Purchase Intention

The results of this study also indicate that perceived influencer professionalism significantly influences consumers' purchase intention toward SME cosmetic products promoted through Instagram. All examined constructs demonstrated statistically significant positive relationships

with purchase intention, suggesting that professionalism-related attributes of influencer content play an important role in shaping consumers' behavioural responses.

Among the constructs examined, ethical expectations demonstrated the strongest relationship with purchase intention. This finding highlights the importance of ethical promotional practices in influencer marketing environments. Consumers may become more willing to purchase products when they perceive influencer content as responsible and trustworthy. Ethical presentation of promotional claims, avoidance of exaggerated promises, and responsible communication regarding product benefits may therefore strengthen consumer confidence and increase willingness to purchase the endorsed product.

Demonstration quality also demonstrated a strong correlation with purchase intention, reinforcing the importance of visually informative promotional content in influencer marketing. When consumers are able to observe how a product is used and understand its potential benefits, they may develop greater confidence in the product's effectiveness. This increased confidence may translate into stronger purchase intentions.

Influencer trustworthiness similarly showed a strong relationship with purchase intention. This finding supports the argument that trust serves as a key mechanism through which influencer marketing affects consumer behaviour. When consumers trust the influencer presenting the promotional message, they may be more inclined to accept the product recommendation and consider purchasing the endorsed item.

Other professionalism attributes, including professionalism and brand alignment, content accuracy, message consistency, engagement quality, and transparency disclosure, also demonstrated significant positive relationships with purchase intention. These results suggest that consumers evaluate influencer marketing campaigns holistically, considering multiple aspects of influencer behaviour and communication when forming purchase decisions.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour by providing empirical evidence regarding the role of professionalism in shaping consumer responses to influencer-promoted brands. While previous research has often focused on influencer popularity, follower count, or parasocial relationships, the present study highlights the importance of specific professional attributes of influencer communication.

The results support the relevance of source credibility theory, which suggests that the persuasiveness of a message is influenced by the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and credibility of the message source (Ohanian, 1990). In the context of influencer marketing, professionalism-related attributes such as content accuracy, transparency, and ethical communication can strengthen perceptions of credibility and therefore enhance persuasive effectiveness.

Furthermore, the findings align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which explains how consumers process persuasive messages through central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In fast-paced social media environments, consumers may rely on heuristic cues when evaluating promotional content. Professional influencer behaviour may function as

such cues, signalling credibility and reliability even when consumers do not conduct extensive evaluation of the promotional message.

Practical Implications for SME Marketing

The findings of this study offer important practical implications for SMEs seeking to leverage influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing strategies. First, the results suggest that SMEs should prioritise influencer professionalism when selecting collaboration partners. Rather than focusing solely on follower counts or popularity metrics, SMEs should evaluate whether influencers demonstrate professionalism in their promotional communication.

Second, the strong influence of demonstration quality suggests that SMEs should encourage influencers to provide clear and informative product demonstrations in promotional posts. Visual demonstrations can help consumers understand product features and reduce uncertainty regarding product performance, which may increase consumer confidence and purchase intention.

Third, transparency and ethical communication should be emphasised in influencer marketing collaborations. Encouraging influencers to clearly disclose promotional partnerships and present honest product information may enhance consumer trust and strengthen brand credibility. In the long term, ethical influencer marketing practices may contribute to sustainable brand relationships with consumers.

Finally, SMEs should recognise that influencer marketing effectiveness depends on multiple interacting factors rather than a single influencer characteristic. Professional communication, credible presentation, audience engagement, and ethical promotional practices collectively contribute to positive consumer perceptions and behavioural outcomes.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between perceived micro-influencer professionalism and consumer responses toward SME cosmetic brands promoted on Instagram. Using survey data collected from Malaysian social media users, the study investigated how various dimensions of influencer professionalism influence consumer brand perception and purchase intention. The findings provide empirical evidence that professionalism-related attributes of influencer marketing play a significant role in shaping consumer evaluations of influencer-endorsed products.

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis indicate that all examined professionalism constructs demonstrate significant positive relationships with both brand perception and purchase intention. Among the constructs analysed, demonstration quality and influencer trustworthiness exhibited particularly strong relationships with brand perception, suggesting that consumers place considerable importance on clear product demonstrations and credible influencer behaviour when evaluating cosmetic products online. Ethical expectations and demonstration quality were also found to strongly influence purchase intention, indicating that consumers are more willing to consider purchasing products promoted through responsible and professionally presented influencer content.

These findings highlight the importance of professionalism as a key factor influencing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. In digital environments where consumers encounter large volumes of promotional content, professional influencer behaviour may function as a credibility signal that helps consumers evaluate the reliability of promotional messages. Accurate information, transparent communication, consistent messaging, and ethical promotional practices can strengthen consumer trust and contribute to more favourable brand evaluations.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on influencer marketing by emphasising the role of professionalism in shaping consumer responses to influencer-promoted brands. The findings support the relevance of source credibility theory, which suggests that the persuasiveness of promotional messages is influenced by the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the communicator. Additionally, the results are consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which proposes that consumers often rely on heuristic cues when processing persuasive messages in digital environments. Professional influencer behaviour may therefore serve as an important credibility cue that guides consumer evaluation in social media marketing contexts.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer useful insights for SMEs seeking to leverage influencer marketing as part of their branding strategies. SMEs operating in competitive cosmetic markets can enhance consumer trust by collaborating with influencers who demonstrate professionalism in their promotional communication. Clear product demonstrations, transparent disclosure of sponsorship relationships, accurate product information, and ethical promotional practices can improve the credibility of influencer marketing campaigns and strengthen consumer purchase intentions.

The results also reinforce the growing recognition that influencer marketing effectiveness depends on more than audience reach or follower count. Increasingly, marketing scholars argue that the quality of influencer communication and the perceived authenticity of promotional messages play a central role in determining consumer responses to social media advertising (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Professional influencer behaviour may therefore represent a key credibility mechanism that helps consumers evaluate the reliability of influencer-endorsed products in digital environments characterised by information overload. For SMEs seeking to establish trust in online marketplaces, prioritising professional influencer partnerships may provide a sustainable strategy for improving brand perception and encouraging consumer purchase intentions.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 100 respondents and the focus on Malaysian consumers may limit the generalisability of the findings to broader populations or different cultural contexts. Future studies are encouraged to employ larger and more diverse samples across multiple regions to enhance external validity.

Second, the study relies on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects. Respondents' perceptions of influencer professionalism and purchase intention may not fully reflect actual consumer behaviour in real-world settings.

Third, the use of Pearson correlation analysis allows for the identification of significant relationships between variables but does not establish causal relationships. Future research may

adopt more advanced analytical techniques such as regression analysis, structural equation modelling (SEM), or experimental designs to examine causal effects and strengthen the robustness of the findings. Future studies may incorporate experimental designs or behavioural data to further investigate consumer responses to influencer marketing.

Future research may also explore additional factors that influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing, such as influencer–brand fit, parasocial relationships between influencers and followers, and the role of audience engagement in shaping consumer attitudes. Comparative studies across different industries or social media platforms may further deepen understanding of how influencer professionalism influences consumer behaviour in various marketing contexts.

Overall, this study demonstrates that micro-influencer professionalism plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions toward SME cosmetic brands promoted on social media. By emphasising professional communication practices in influencer collaborations, SMEs can strengthen consumer trust, enhance brand perception, and improve the effectiveness of their digital marketing strategies.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to express sincere appreciation to all respondents who participated in this study and contributed their time to the survey data collection process. Their participation and willingness to share their perspectives on influencer marketing and cosmetic product promotions on Instagram were essential to the completion of this research. The author also extends gratitude to the researcher's academic supervisors and colleagues for their guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous encouragement throughout the development of this study. Their support and insights contributed significantly to strengthening the quality and rigor of the research.

Generative artificial intelligence tools were used as language assistance during the drafting and editing stages of the manuscript to support clarity, organisation, and academic presentation. These tools were not used to generate research data or analytical results. All research design decisions, data analysis procedures, interpretation of findings, and final manuscript preparation were conducted and critically reviewed by the author. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the research presented in this article.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Management Practices (IJEMP).

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Research Ethics Committee, approval number **REC/01/2026 (PG/MR/49)**. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Firdaus Hamdi was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Wan Nadhra Ixora and Muhammad Hisyam handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Nasaie Zainuddin contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177>
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
- Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2018). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 510–519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.005>
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>
- Erdem, T., & Swait, J. (2004). Brand credibility, brand consideration, and choice. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.1086/383434>
- Evans, N. J., Phua, J., Lim, J., & Jun, H. (2017). Disclosing Instagram influencer advertising: The effects of disclosure language on advertising recognition, attitudes, and behavioral intent. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 70, 138–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2017.1366885>
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public Relations Review*, 37(1), 90–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>
- Kapitan, S., & Silvera, D. H. (2016). From digital media influencers to celebrity endorsers: Attributions drive endorser effectiveness. *International Journal of Advertising*, 35(5), 814–834. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-015-9363-0>
- Ki, C. W. C., & Kim, Y. K. (2019). The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 101, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21244>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191>
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4964-1>
- Petty, R. E., Cacioppo, J. T., & Schumann, D. (1983). Central and peripheral routes to advertising effectiveness: The moderating role of involvement. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10(2), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1086/208954>
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). Celebrity vs. influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and product-endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(2), 258–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898>
- Sokolova, K., & Kefi, H. (2020). Instagram and YouTube bloggers influence on consumers' purchase intention: The role of perceived credibility and parasocial interaction. *Journal*

of Retailing and Consumer Services, 53, 101742.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.01.011>

Uzunoglu, E., & Kip, S. M. (2014). Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement. *International Journal of Information Management*, 34(5), 592–602. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2014.04.007>

Wiedmann, K. P., Hennigs, N., & Langner, S. (2010). Spreading the word of fashion: Identifying social influencers in fashion marketing. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing* 1(3), 142–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2010.10593066>